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The Alfred Cortot study edition of Chopin's Etudes & how the Alexander Technique can facilitate progress towards performance through his suggested exercises

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THE ALFRED CORTOT STUDY EDITION OF CHOPIN'S ETUDES & HOW THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE CAN FACILITATE PROGRESS TOWARDS PERFORMANCE THROUGH HIS SUGGESTED EXERCISES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research paper is to study how the Alexander Technique can be applied to the process of pianistic practicing, and specific technique issues. The sets of exercises I choose to focus on are from the Alfred Cortot study edition of Chopin's Etudes, op. 10 and op. 25. The Alexander Technique is a method of releasing unnecessary muscular tension when performing every action, including motions in piano playing. Therefore, the preparatory exercises suggested by Alfred Cortot in his study editions can be more effectively executed by applying the Alexander Technique principles.

This research paper is divided into four chapters. The first chapter commences with background information about the teaching edition of Chopin's Etudes by Alfred Cortot. As an exemplary pianist and teacher, Cortot's contribution to the development of piano technique was and remains of landmark significance. It is valuable and important to examine how his systematic methods can lead pianists to conquer technical problems and refine their performance.

Before focusing on the Alexander Technique in two sets of Chopin's Etudes, the second chapter will provide readers with a brief biography of Frederick Matthias Alexander, founder of the Alexander Technique. The chapter will then go on to reveal how he established the Technique and shaped it into a complete curriculum whose goal is to re-educate the way in which physical aspects of human life are experienced. Finally, this chapter examines the main principles of the Alexander Technique and its applications for musicians and pianists.

After examining Cortot's study edition of the Chopin Etudes and establishing the value of the Alexander Technique for pianists, in the next two chapters I apply core ideas of the Technique to pianistic practicing of the individual Chopin Etudes through Alfred Cortot's preparatory exercises. Chapter 3 focuses on Op. 10 Etudes. Chapter 4 focuses on Op. 25. It is hoped that the results of this research study will be beneficial for pianists, and facilitate progress in learning Chopin's Etudes by applying principles of the Alexander Technique.

INTRODUCTION

At one point or another in their educational or professional careers, a high percentage of musicians complain of a variety of muscle-related problems tied to performance. These problems can easily lead to injury if ignored. Though instructors and doctors may help fix a problem temporarily, it tends to be a recurring condition requiring regular attention. Being a pianist and well-practiced student for almost 25 years, I too have suffered from various afflictions and their subsequent frustrations until discovering the Alexander Technique. Recently, less than a year ago, I began taking Alexander lessons with Professor Patricia O'Neill, a skilled Alexander teacher and voice professor at Louisiana State University. I soon became much more aware of how my body functions. By learning the Alexander Technique, I changed the way I applied myself and put into practice indirect changes to my performance habits. The Alexander Technique encompasses a wide range of instructions and is taught differently by different teachers. In order to understand how one is mishandling oneself, engaging the expertise of an Alexander teacher is highly recommended. This teacher can help realign your posture through a hands-on approach that helps performers assess the merits of their habits objectively.

This research paper began with my experiences in overcoming the technical difficulties I encountered in performance. Over the years, there have been some theses discussing the application of Alexander Technique in piano performance, including the most recent two: *An Exploration of Potential Contributions of the Alexander Technique to Piano Pedagogy*[1] by Patricia Furst Santiago in 2004, and *A Study of Tension in*

1. Patricia Furst Santiago, "An Exploration of Potential Contributions of the Alexander Technique to Piano Pedagogy" (PhD diss., University of London, 2004).

Piano Playing: Approaches to Piano Technique and Examinations of Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method in Avoiding Problems of Tension[2] by Kuniko Ishida in 2003. Each provides many valuable viewpoints of the Technique that focus on piano teaching and learning. However, in this research paper, I will explore and apply the Technique to specific technical difficulties occurring in the twenty-four Chopin Etudes.

I have chosen the Chopin etudes because they are among the most technically challenging in the works piano literature. With regard to their expressive qualities and exploration of tone color, Chopin's etudes are the quintessence of the virtuoso character etude. For pianists, these works are not easy to perform perfectly and injury is possible if the pianist does not have a honed awareness of his body and its tendencies to misuse. Thus, I have also employed for this paper Alfred Cortot's perspective on technique as found in his study edition. Alfred Cortot is widely admired as one of the finest pianists of the twentieth century. He established systematic methods to study difficult passages in proper sequence, reducing complex figurations to their basic elements. This rational process in learning a whole musical piece is similar to the key principle of the Alexander Technique—*one after the other, all together*.[3] It merits discussion because the patient and slow, and even tedious process of learning challenging compositions mirrors the ideas embraced by the Alexander Technique. Therefore, Cortot's preparatory exercises form an ideal laboratory for study.

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2. Kuniko Ishida, "A Study of Tension in Piano Playing: Approaches to Piano Technique and Examinations of Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method in Avoiding Problems of Tension" (Master's thesis, Griffith University, 2003).

3. Pedro de Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 160.

Ultimately, and due to unique human characteristics, each performer may experience different problems and tensions when facing a variety of highly technical passages. In this paper, a variety of potential technical problems will be discussed and some basic principles will be proposed according to each individual's pianistic technique. An enhanced understanding of the body and its best use is a slow learning process that entails a new way of facing these challenges. But with focused attention, pianists can steadily improve their ability to circumvent muscle-related troubles.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF ALFRED CORTOT AND HIS STUDY EDITION OF CHOPIN ETUDES

Alfred Denis Cortot (September 26, 1877—June 15, 1962)

> *I am a man who has always believed that life is not made of what one finds in it, but of what one brings to it.*[4] A. C.

Music, for Cortot, as well as life, is made of what one brings to it. "Music will live forever," said Cortot, "same as Homer or Shakespeare, and will never become a lost art. It will always exist because it is an expression of man's heart. Beauty can never perish."[5] Although he was a conductor and teacher, Cortot is admired as one of the finest pianists of the 20th century and famous for his brilliant technique and expressive lyricism, especially in Romantic repertoire. Furthermore, his contribution to the development of piano technique was and remains of landmark significance. Among his writings, Cortot left an essay about interpretation, *Cours d'interprétation,* 1934 *(*English translated version as *Studies in Musical Interpretation),* and two books, *La musique française de piano,* 1930-48, and *Aspects de Chopin,* 1949 *(In Search of Chopin).*

Alfred Cortot was born in Nyon, Switzerland, to a French father and a Swiss mother. He entered the Paris Conservatory and studied piano under Émile Decombes, one of Chopin's disciples, and Louis Diémer. During the period in Conservatory, he took composition lessons with Raoul Pugno and Xavier Leroux. In

4. Bernard Gavoty, *Alfred Cortot: Portraits by Roger Hauert*, Great Concert Artists (Geneva/Monaco: René Kister et Union Européenne d'éditions, 1955), 3.

5. Alexander Kosloff, "A Visit with Alfred Cortot," *Music Educator's Journal* 48, no. 4 (February-March, 1962): 142, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3389558 (accessed May 19, 2010).

1896, he won a *premier prix* for piano, and then made his debut successfully playing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 at the Concerts Colonne in Paris. From 1898, he devoted himself to conducting and performing as a concert pianist. He became an assistant conductor at the Bayreuth Festival. In 1902, he conducted the Paris première of Götterdämmerung by Wagner. He showed great enthusiasm for Wagner's music, memorizing all his operas and playing them in reduction at the piano.[6] Later on, he established the Paris Symphony Orchestra, the Orchestre Philharmonique, and the Chamber Orchestra of the Ecole Normale.[7]

Although he was occupied with concert tours all over Europe and the USA, he was very enthusiastic about academic teaching. In addition, he also loved playing chamber music. In 1905, with cellist Pablo Casals and violinist Jacques Thibaud, he formed a wonderful trio and established a great reputation wherever they concertized. Fortunately, there are some high quality chamber music recordings left by them. These include Mendelssohn D minor Trio, Schumann D minor Trio, Beethoven's *Archduke*, B-flat major Trio and Schubert's B-flat major Trio.[8]

In 1907, he was appointed by Gabriel Fauré as a piano professor at the Paris Conservatory and stayed there until 1923. His pupils included Clara Haskil, Yvonne Lefébure, Dinu Lipatti, Vlado Perlemuter, and

6. Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists* (New York: A Fireside Book Published by Simon and Schuster, 1963), 381.

7. Gavoty, *Alfred Cortot*, 30.

8. David Dubal, *The Art of the Piano: Its Performers, Literature, and Recordings*, 2nd ed. (Orlando: Harcout Brace & Company, 1989), 49-50.

Marguerite Monnot. [9] In 1919, he founded the École Normale de Musique de Paris, and served as the director and president. With outstanding faculty, they covered large areas in music history and theory. The interpretation master classes offered by Cortot were admired by large numbers of musicians.[10] Cortot once shared his wonderful experience of having a lesson with Anton Rubinstein at Diémer's house in Paris. He played the Sonata *Appassionata* by Beethoven. After he finished, a long silence ensued and this frustrated Cortot's enthusiasm for playing. When he tried to find his way to the door, Rubinstein caught him and said sincerely "My child, don't forget what I am going to tell you: Beethoven cannot be played—he must be recreated."[11] Cortot was deeply inspired by what Rubinstein said to him and remembered this every time he gave lessons to young musicians. He said, "There are two possible attitudes when one is confronted with a great work of art—the motionless and the adventurous. Playing as the composer wished or following the tradition of his pupils—what does that involve? What is needed is to give free rein to the imagination, to recreate the composition and make it live. That is what interpretation means…."[12] For Cotot, "music must live in us and with us." The wonderful moment which takes place from interpreter through music recreates a beauty of Nature.[13]

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9. Martin Cooper and Charles Timbrell, "Cortot, Alfred," *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/06587 (accessed May 21, 2010).

10. Dubal, *The Art of the Piano*, 50.

11. Gavoty, *Alfred Cortot*, 12-13.

12. Ibid., 13.

13. Alfred Cortot, *Studies in Musical Interpretation*, trans. Robert Jaques (London: G. G. Harrap, 1937; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), 18.

About the preparation before the lessons, Cortot made a point that students should study all the information, including historical background, philosophical thoughts, and poetic and literary associations regarding the music and composers they played.[14] For lessons, he even asked students to submit an analysis paper of the music. He called it a "geographical map."[15] He made a guide for the pupil to follow when working on an analytical sketch for each piece. Furthermore, Cortot thought that pupils should point out the distinguishing characteristics of harmonic analysis, the character and meaning of the work from their point of view. Aesthetic and technical observations should also serve as an important guide for the interpreter.[16] Thomas Manshardt, a private pupil of Cortot from 1957 until his death in 1962, recalled that "the pianist, according to Cortot, must labour ceaselessly to identify himself with the personality of the composer and with the nature of the civilization whence his works emerged, but it must be understood that musical notation is at best a mere sketch, a mere implying of what might be realized by the interpreter."[17] He thought proper preparations are needed to achieve the most ideal performance, but musicians must bring this knowledge out from their hearts and through their lively fingers.

Cortot is best known for his performances of the Romantic piano repertoire. Although there was a reaction, arising of impressionism and neoclassicism, against Germanic Romantic music in the early

14. Nicolas Slonimsky, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Classical Musicians*, ed. Laura Kuhn and Dennis McIntire (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 261.

15. Dubal, *The Art of the Piano*, 50.

16. Cortot, *Studies in Musical Interpretation*, 19.

17. Thomas Manshardt, *Aspects of Cortot* (Hexham: Appian Pulications and Recordings, 1994), 11.

twentieth century during his youth, the Germanic Romantic tradition still remained strong in France. Cortot's piano teachers in Paris were the group who centered on the works of Romanticism. Cortot recalled this group as "The Generation of my teachers."

> … represented a direct link with the heyday of the Romanticism. I learned what Chopin was like from Mme. Camille Dubois, Mathias and Decombes. I heard Liszt spoken about as though he were still alive: Fauré, Saint-Saëns….and Mme. Diemer had known him and often heard him play. A little later, I was present on many occasions when Cosima Wagner reminisced about her father…… Mme. Schumann was still alive when I gave my Vienna debut recital several years after this. These now legendary figures populated my youth like familiar spirits. For me romanticism was not at all a mythical era but rather a near-contemporary one. Is it any wonder, then, that I believed in it whole-hearted?[18]

His playing revealed strong personal lyricism and poetry, and transcendental elegance. The spirit of Romanticism represented through Cortot seems somehow innovative and bold, especially with regard to Chopin.[19] One of his pupils, Magda Tagliaferro, said, "The images that he conjured up were absolutely visionary."[20] David Dubal, a Steinway artist and professor teaching piano literature at the Juilliard School since 1983, commented that:

18. Karen M. Taylor, "Alfred Cortot: His Interpretive Art and Teachings" (DMA diss., Indiana University, 1988), 204.

19. James Giles, "Chopin and Alfred Cortot" (DMA diss., The Manhattan School of Music, 2000), 1.

20. Dubal, *The Art of the Piano*, 51.

> Cortot was one of the "originals" in the history of interpretation. He was highly unpredictable and relied heavily on inspiration. There was always a new flash of insight, a left-hand caress, even a countermelody of his own invention. The audience felt included in a special intimate moment. Everything was heightened with an uncanny elegance. He was so Romantic, truly the most youthfully Romantic of the great pianists. He had an inspired sense of rubato. For Cortot, music was aspiration, a reaching for the unknown. He reached for elusive lights and shadows. If ever a pianist had the power to seduce and intoxicate, it was Cortot.[21]

There are a series of highly acclaimed recordings left by him. These include Schumann's piano concerto, *Etudes symphoniques*, *Kreisleriana*, and *Papillons*; Chopin's Ballades, Preludes, Etudes and Sonata in B minor; Franck's *Prélude, choral et fugue* (1929) and Saint-Saëns's Fourth Concerto.[22] Although he covered an immense repertoire in his career, Cortot centered on his favorite Chopin pieces. There are various versions in his recordings of Chopin, including Twenty-Four Preludes, Op. 28, Twenty-Four Etudes, Three *Nouvelles Etudes*, Four Impromptus, Waltzes, Scherzi, Nocturnes, Barcarolle…etc.[23] "There is perhaps nothing which reveals Cortot's sorcery better than do these—Chopin's waltzes and preludes," remarked by his biographer, Bernard Gavoty. "He brings to them that spirited elegance and mournful charm which make them so much more than mere fine-cut jewels: in his hands they become paintings or visions." He created and revealed in every moment he touched the piano a delicate and exquisite poet's imagination. He said to himself, "I am

21. Dubal, *The Art of the Piano*, 51.

22. Cooper and Timbrell, "Cortot, Alfred."

23. Dubal, 51-52.

Cortot: I am playing this waltz;" now he is murmuring, "I am Chopin: I dreamt it…."[24] We can feel intensely, his enthusiasm and admiration for this Polish master in his book, *In Search Of Chopin*, and in the prose of his study editions of Chopin's music as well.

Although a concert pianist for many years already, Cortot never felt easy controlling the keyboard, at least not until 1937. The movements of his gestures and fingers did not always satisfy him. What he deemed ungraceful technique and clumsy postures caused him long tedious hours of practicing every morning. For that reason, he became interested in how to educate the hands in both physical and psychological ways.[25] It was then that he established the systematic technical method put forth in his book, *Principes rationnels de la technique pianistique*, and also created his study edition of Chopin, which will be mentioned in more detail later in this chapter.

For Cortot's teaching repertoire, recalled some students, he liked to assign the etudes that combined both didactic and musical values to a concert repertoire such as those of Chopin, Liszt and Moszkowski. By working on those concert-type studies, pianists can develop their technique and the sound capabilities of the instrument. Cortot asked students to prepare different Chopin etudes for each lesson.[26] Collecting his many years' teaching experience on those etudes and other major Romantic repertoire, Cortot contributed his own editions to a large collection of piano music by Chopin, Schumann and Liszt. Those study editions, entitled

24. Gavoty, *Alfred Cortot*, 6-7.

25. Roger Nichols, "Alfred Cortot, 1877-1962," *The Musical Times* 123, no. 1677 (November, 1982): 762-763, http://www.jstor.org/stable/961596 (accessed May 19, 2010).

26. Taylor, "Alfred Cortot", 404.

Editions de Travail, included seventy-six volumes. He supplied some didactic prose, beneficial technical advice, and original annotations with aesthetic commentary, discussions of character, interpretation, style, elements and expressive considerations.[27] These ideas, thought processes, along with preparatory exercises constructed on difficult passages, could lead pianists to conquer the technical problems and refine the performance.

Cortot's first complete study edition, completed in 1915 when he was still teaching at Conservatory, is devoted to Chopin's Etudes, Op. 10 and Op. 25.[28] In this edition, his emphasis was more on technical exercises than interpretative commentary. In the Preface to his first French edition, he expressed clearly the principle for his study methods: *"La loi essentielle de cette méthod est de travailler, non pas le passage difficile, mais la difficulté contenue dans ce passage en lui restituant son caractere élémentaire."* "The essential principle of this method is to study not the difficult passage but the difficulty itself, reducing it to its basic element."[29] From this point on, he tried to bring out a concept of practicing process that was in proper sequence. If musicians want to solve or refine their technique, they need only look back to the small basic elements in a rational way. However, "rules may indeed be set down concerning the manual practice of an Art: but personality and taste have never followed rules," wrote Cortot in his Chopin Etudes edition.[30]

27. Taylor, "Alfred Cortot", 6.

28. Ibid., 416.

29. Ibid., 417.

30. Frédéric Chopin, foreword to *12 Studies, Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Alfred Cortot, trans. M. Parkinson (Italy: Éditions Salabert, 2000).

Finally, Cortot synthesized his general observations on piano technique in his book, *Principes rationnels de la technique pianistique (Rational Principles of Pianoforte Technique*), 1928. He brought up an important point in the progress of instrumental teaching that "the mechanical and long-repeated practice of a difficult passage has been replaced by the reasoned study of the difficulty contained therein, reduced to its elementary principle."[31] He divided systematic exercises into five categories: 1) equality, independence and mobility of the fingers; 2) scales-arpeggios; 3) double notes and polyphonic playing; 4) the technique of extensions; 5) wrist technique and execution of chords. The immediate goal of those warm-up exercises is to loosen the playing mechanism, though the pianist can apply those ideas directly into playing the main repertoire.

From those study editions and a unique book dealing with technical issues, we can see how detailed and strict his distinctive methodical approach is. In his mind, this approach should be worked on diligently and efficiently to achieve a worthy performance of a piece. Although Cortot had great hands and could achieve the technical fireworks the music needed, he never played like a technician, but always with an intellectual command.[32] "To become a pianist one must be possessed by music," said Cortot.[33]

31. Alfred Cortot, foreword to *Rational Principles of Pianoforte Technique*, trans. R. Le Roy-Metaxas (New York: Oliver Ditson, 1930).

32. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists*, 383.

33. Kosloff, "A Visit with Alfred Cortot," 142.

CHAPTER TWO

F. MATTHIAS ALEXANDER AND THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Frederick Matthias Alexander (January 20, 1869 – October 10, 1955)

Frederick Matthias Alexander was an Australian orator who established the so-called Alexander Technique, termed after his death. The development of this teaching technique came about through the loss of his voice as a Shakespearean actor. The Technique is a method of observing how a performer uses his own body and refining sensory awareness through conscious bodily coordination.

Alexander, F. M. as he was generally known to friends and followers, was born in Wynyard, on the north-western coast of Tasmania on 20 January 1869. He was a premature baby, struggling to survive from his birth. Throughout his early education, his unusual temperament made him a difficult pupil. For him to learn, knowledge had to be well-explained to him. At the age of his sixteen, F. M. once said that he "had never understood how it was possible to believe anything without first experiencing it".[34] F. M. later recalled that his belief in experientialism would direct the development of the Alexander Technique.[35]

Life in Wynyard for F. M. was quite simple. Apart from school, he loved his grandfather's country estate, where he developed an obsession with horses, and enjoyed Nature. Another interest during his teenage years was classical drama. His interest in theatre was intense, particularly with Shakespeare. He moved to

34. Michael Bloch, *F. M. The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander: Founder of the Alexander Technique* (London: A Little, Brown, 2004), 20.

35. Ibid, 20.

Melbourne at the age of twenty with a sense of adventure and aspirations for a career on the stage in the future. As a Shakespearean actor specializing in recitation, he gave recitals and performed in plays touring around Australia and Tasmania, soon acquiring an excellent reputation. Nevertheless, good times didn't last long. Around late 1891, he began to experience poor health. F. M. was compelled by illness to reduce his workload on stage. After recovering most of his health around the second half of 1892, one symptom still persisted—hoarseness. As a Shakespearean orator, his career on stage was hampered by this serious vocal problem. He sought some help from doctors and vocal experts and was advised to rest his voice. It had some effect, but the hoarseness returned again while reciting on stage. He tried to figure out what caused this problem when using, or rather misusing, the mechanisms of his throat, because he was really sure that "it must be something which I do with my throat when reciting, which brings about this condition."[36]

Alexander's process of self discovery is documented in the opening chapter "Evolution of a Technique" of his third book, *The Use of the Self* (1932). During his self-observation in mirrors where he arranged for a full view of his throat, he noticed he had three tendencies which he saw himself doing when reciting. He noticed that "as soon as I started to recite, I tended to pull back the head, depress the larynx and suck in breath through the mouth in such a way as to produce a gasping sound."[37] This series of habitual responses was triggered by the act of recitation, and those immediate responses affected the functioning of his entire self. After long, thoughtful experimentation, he realized that "the solution lay in seeking to *inhibit* (that is,

36. Patrick Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique: As I See It* (Brighton: Rahula Books, 1989), 38.

37. Frederick Matthias Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, The Books of F. Matthias Alexander (New York: Irdeat, 1997), 413.

refrain from doing) what was wrong rather than *do* what was right, in relying on *conscious control* rather than unconscious habit, and in focusing the mind on the *means whereby* rather than *the end to be gained*."[38] Such principles will be explored in much more detail later on in this chapter.

Then, early in 1895, he returned to the stage with confidence during every performance. His problem with hoarseness was no longer a concern. In successive recitals, he "mastered his vocal troubles and perfected his recitation act with considerable acclaim".[39] While pursuing a world-famous reputation as an actor and a teacher for his Technique, he moved to London and remained there for 10 years, from 1904 to 1914. Alexander taught his new method to many musicians and actors in London and recorded some of his successful cases in pamphlets. F. M. intended to publish a book to explain his Technique while still in Australia. But after arriving in London, he recorded each lesson in more detail, contributing findings from his own experiences as well as those he discovered in individual students. In October 1910, he published his first book, *Man's Supreme Inheritance*. Although this book didn't follow a very good logical progression, he still tried to give readers his ideas about the development of mankind and the inadequacy of the physical culture and its exercises.[40] "Civilization had made a normal body a problem," said the English and Biblical Literature professor at Columbia University, Richard Morse Hodge, after reviewing Alexander's first book. Mr. Hodge also annotated that "the author furnished the evidence necessary to show that we can use our

38. Bloch, *F. M. The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander*, 35.

39. Ibid., 39-40.

40. Ibid., 88.

bodies, and our minds, therefore, to much greater advantage than most of us do, and that the way lies in a further general progress of the race from instinctive guidance to conscious control."[41] Besides this, he gave a number of instructive examples to explain what "conscious control" and "inhibition" meant from his Technique in this book.

Due to the First World War, beginning in 1914, he split his time between England and the United States until 1924, maintaining his practicing, teaching and writing about the Technique. During those ten years, F. M. became acquainted with the famous American philosopher and educationist, John Dewey (1859-1952) and formed a close friendship with him. F. M. was deeply influenced by Dewey's philosophy in different ways.[42] In F. M.'s second book, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (1923), his discoveries evolved into a system of universal philosophy and more coherent theoretical thoughts. Dewey had offered to read and contribute an introduction to this book. He made a point that "Alexander's system differed completely from other remedial systems in that it deals not with cures but with causes; … the validity of his system is constantly being tested by experiment." Dewey was also strongly influenced by F. M.'s teaching. "The greatest benefit he got from lessons was the ability to stop and think before acting."[43] Dewey concluded that "Mr Alexander has demonstrated a new scientific principle with respect to the control of

41. Richard Morse Hodge, "What is Man's Supreme Inheritance?," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1918, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9806E4DC103BEE3ABC4D53DFB3668383609EDE (accessed June 12, 2010).

42. Pedro de Alcantara, Appendix C: F. M. Alexander: A Biographical Sketch to *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 283.

43. Bloch, *F. M. The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander*, 108.

human behavior as important as any principle which has ever been discovered in the domain of external nature."[44]

F. M. returned to London in 1924 and moved into his country house in Kent, where he first constituted his school. He remained devoted to the study of his Technique. He began to translate his theories into a complete curriculum for the teaching of children, called "Little School," and a teacher-training course.[45] He instructed many students, including famous actors, philosophers, writers, musicians, and scientists. However, one strong category of F. M.'s supporters was doctors who had practical experience with the Technique and were convinced by the work.[46] There is a letter, signed by nineteen doctors, published in the *British Medical Journal* on 29 May 1937. It was a petition proclaiming that the British Medical Association should eventually include the Alexander Technique in the medical curriculum.[47] Although the Alexander Technique is not a therapy for patients, it really helped people have different attitudes toward their illness and prevented things from going wrong.[48]

Aside from his great enthusiasm for teaching, F. M. continued to put his ideas and discoveries in writing. In 1931, he completed his third book, *The Use of the Self*, published in 1932. Again, the famous philosopher John Dewey wrote the introduction to this book. He made a strong statement to support this Technique with

44. Bloch, *F. M. The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander*, 123.

45. Alcantara, Appendix C to *Indirect Procedures*, 283.

46. Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique*, 101.

47. Bloch, 165.

48. Alcantara, 277-278.

each lesson offered by F. M. as "a laboratory experimental demonstration." He also noted that the Technique "bears the same relation to education that education bears to all other human activities."[49] As mentioned earlier, there is one chapter in which F. M. depicted in detail his discoveries, which led to solving his own vocal problems. Ten years later, came his fourth and last book, *The Universal Constant in Living*, in 1941. In this book, he illustrated his work with more medical cases and showed how his students dealt with their problems in progress. Compared to his first three books, he stressed the importance of the concept of *inhibition* much more than before, shaping his Technique into a more comprehensive system, which reflected forty-five years worth of experiences.[50]

The Alexander Technique

From early on, F. M. Alexander believed the body had an innate intelligence that seeks balance and a natural rhythm. When that fundamental rhythm is contorted, mental and physical disease are the results. The Technique shows people how to re-educate themselves with correct sensory awareness and strategies of how they could use the whole body.[51] For his technique, Alexander developed some special terms and principles to convey his ideas in practice. When learning the Technique, there are six principles we should understand: Use of the Self, Primary Control, Awareness, Inhibition, Direction and Action.

49. Bloch, *F. M. The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander*, 145.

50. Ibid., 181.

51. Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique*, xiii.

Use of the Self

Humans always work as a whole, indivisibly with body, mind, and spirit interwoven. In the Technique, Alexander avoided using words like "body mechanic" and "mental states" to separate the Man. Instead, he created "the self" as a unity, and described its use and functioning in practice in his book, *The Use of the Self*. Pedro de Alcantara, cellist and master Alexander teachers said that "Alexander Technique is not a method of physical relaxation, or posture, or the use of the body, but of the use of the self."[52] Generally speaking, our posture is a position we present to the world. However, within the self, it is linked to a set of attitudes, thoughts, and feelings. For example, when you observe the way people speak, timbre, intonation, gesticulation, diction and vocabulary are different from person to person. The way one uses their self while speaking is unique and reflects who they are.[53] Alexander notes that when "talk[ing] about a man's individuality and character: it's the way he uses himself."[54]

What causes the problem of 'ill-health'? When a musician has intermittent aches in his right shoulder, he is often diagnosed by a doctor as suffering from tendonitis. The doctor applies some remedy, such as physiotherapy, drugs, surgery, or he recommends some program of exercise and rest. After running through a series of medical therapies, in most cases, the problem still remains and sometimes gets worse. However, "Alexander found that the cause of our troubles [is] not in what is done to us, but in what we do to

52. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 9-11.

53. Ibid., 12-13.

54. Richard Williams, "Age of the Rocket Man," *Independent on Sunday Review*, June 20, 1993.

ourselves."[55] That is what Alexander called *misuse of the self*. In the case of the musician's previously mentioned shoulder ache, we can say that he misused the muscles in his shoulders, and this misuse affects his functioning. However, what is the cause of misuse? From Alexander's discoveries, the unconscious habit of *end-gaining* affects the functioning the whole self. The young singer whose goal is simply to sing loudly, for instance, is end-gaining if she neglects the possible means to achieve the goal and instead straining her vocal chords and sounding muscles. Conversely, consideration of the *means-whereby*, a principle of the Technique, guides her toward an indirect way to sing loudly that does not cause her to misuse herself. Stopping her misuse is the key to achieving health and balanced use.

Primary Control

A mechanism of alignment that affects the total use of the self involves the relationship between head, neck and back—a relationship Alexander called *Primary Control*. According to him, "this is a master reflex of the body, so that by organizing it one can modify all the postural relationships throughout the body."[56] All partial patterns, such as movement of limbs, hands or fingers, should be performed in harmony with the head-neck-back relationship. Therefore, Primary Control should take priority over all localized action.[57] There is no right position to hold one's head, neck and back. How to use the Primary Control well depends to how one coordinates the relationship of head to neck and head and neck to the back. Most people use their

55. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 5.

56. Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique*, 6.

57. Alcantara, 26.

Primary Control unconsciously, but may misuse it because of the habit of end-gaining. Awareness of how one uses their Primary Control may feel strange at first, but they will appreciate how beautifully it works when they are moving gracefully or standing with poise.[58] Described below is how Primary Control works by following the laws of Nature inherent within the structure of human beings:

> Your active understanding of the relationship of head, neck, and back is fluid both in the short and in the long term. And so it should be. …… The spine is neither contracted not slack. The back is lengthening and widening, the shoulders are broadening. The neck remains an extension of the spine, allowing the head to move freely on the joint between skull and neck. Their entire bodies are oriented upwards, and their energies outwards. …… There are no physical exercises to improve the Primary Control. Instead, you must first stop contracting your head into your neck, and then prevent this contraction from recurring.[59]

There are many ways to improve use of Primary Control. Among them is the hands-on approach by an Alexander teacher who puts forward the most effective way to address different kinds of misuses. The Technique does not teach positions. It teaches students to see how Primary Control regulates total coordination of self in normal positions and how uses affect functioning.[60]

Awareness

As mentioned in the previous section, conscious awareness of the use of one's Primary Control may feel unusual. Why? There may be something one misunderstands or ignores, without knowing it. For instance,

58. Brennan, *The Alexander Technique Manual*, 15.

59. Alcantara, 30-31.

60. Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique*, 21.

when playing a sonata in the studio, a colleague may tell you that you rush too much for the lyrical second theme section. Right at that moment, one will likely react with this response, "Really? I think I play in tempo." Sometimes the tempo is rushed but one is not alerted to it because of *faulty sensory awareness*. As Alexander wrote in his second book, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, "our sensory peculiarities are the foundation of what we think of as our opinions, and that, in fact, nine out of ten of the opinions we form are rather the result of what we feel than what we think."[61] Experienced Alexandrians will likely say, 'you think you don't rush the tempo, but you should accept that you may be wrong when you *feel* right.'[62] Nevertheless, Alexander believed that performers could re-educate themselves in order to make their sensory awareness more reliable.

What causes our sensory perception to become unreliable? The most important reason for the Alexander teacher is misuse of the self. Pedro de Alcantara addressed this issue:

> The freer a body part is, the better able it is to sense accurately what it is doing. When you misuse yourself you over-contract some parts of the body, and leave others too slack. The whole self suffers, including head, neck, and back. Every time you contract your neck you disturb its many proprioceptors and distort their feedback. Misuse, in other words, always causes a distortion of sensory perception.[63]

61. Frederick Matthias Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, The Books of F. Matthias Alexander (New York: Irdeat, 1997), 304.

62. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 39.

63. Ibid., 42-43.

The only way one can re-educate and improve one's sensory awareness is to stop doing something wrong—stop misusing one's body. "If one is misusing oneself it must be an advantage to be able to correct this misuse. If one's sensory appreciation is false—*all else is false*."[64] When you change your use, the new experience will come with a new sensation. Doing something new and different provides perspective on what was done before. Now, there is sensory awareness of what was felt after it happened.[65]

Inhibition

Stopping misuse is the key to preventing *end-gaining*. "To improve the *Primary Control*, you must first stop contracting your head into your neck, and then prevent this contraction from recurring."[66] As mentioned in the Awareness section, new experience helps us become aware of what happened before, which was indeed wrong. Now we should learn to be able to *inhibit* before it happens. The Alexander Technique is not merely a method to improve the use of the self and the sensory perception. By practicing the Technique, we learn how to pause before action and make a choice, which is better for our life.[67]

When deciding to do something, one triggers a set of automatic reactions with habitual misuses. The first step in changing use is to 'stop wanting to do something' as it is understood with accumulated memory.[68] For example, ignoring the temptation to play loudly as usual, is what is called *inhibition* in the Alexander

64. Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique*, xiii.

65. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 45.

66. Ibid., 31.

67. Brennan, *The Alexander Technique Manual*, 31.

68. Alcantara, 64.

Technique. As with trying to play loudly, this wish makes the body responsible for the end goal and readies it for action. One discovers when acting on this wish, the shoulders raise up, the head contracts into the neck, the arms stiffen and breathing becomes more rapid. These are automatic reactions with habitual misuse. The result is then the inability to play as loudly as one wishes, collapsing Primary Control and causing possible injury to oneself. "To inhibit interference with the Primary Control is very near, in character, to inhibiting the wishes, desires, and motivations that set up the interference in the first place."[69] Before reacting instinctively in any given situation or with any given stimulus, inhibition should begin with preparation and be continuous once each action takes place. *Inhibition* is both a concept and a process in Technique.

Direction

When deciding to do something, there is a command delivered by the brain. Then the body responds. This is the simple and logical description of how the self responds to understanding of five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. Besides these five senses, there is one more element that affects use of the self—*thought*. For Alexandrians, "think up" is a very important psychological principle in relation to the total use of the self. "There is a constant connection between brain and muscle—between what I think and what I do. It is impossible to say of an act that it is purely mental or purely physical."[70] This connection, linking thought with action, is what is called *direction* in Technique.

69. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 47.

70. Ibid., 55.

Learning to direct is not to control the mind or the body. As Alexander thought, "the word "directing" is consciously to give a mental order to your body, so that your body will respond to what you tell it to do rather than working by habit alone."[71] When directing is healthy, it results in a good use of self with perfect balance—that is 'well directed.' In the Technique, one learns how to give more than one direction to activities at a given time. Before one can handle "thinking up" and 'reacting' at the same time, one needs to break down reactions step by step. A good direction, which can be understood in a precise way by the self, should include three elements—actions, body parts and orientation in space or a muscular sense.[72] An illustration of how to verbalize various directions for the Primary Control is as follows: Let the neck be free, let the head go forward and up, let the back lengthen and widen, one after the other, all together.[73] These directions energize the body in a different way and make one change one's use at will. "To direct is to *will*—to intend, to choose, to decide."[74]

Action

From Alexander's discoveries in Technique, *end-gaining* causes a habitual action, misuse of the self. An inhabitual gesture, based on the *means-whereby* principle, is accomplished by the employing of the Alexander processes of Primary Control, self-awareness, inhibition, and direction. After practicing these processes one

71. Brennan, *The Alexander Technique Manual*, 22.

72. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 61.

73. Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique*, 47.

74. Alcantara, *64*.

after another, all together several times, we improve use of the self in a good way—via the same processes employed by Alexander to find a solution to his vocal problem. At that critical moment to DO something, the body won't easily feel perfect balance at all. Alexander found that "however well he directed his preparations for an act, he lost his directions when he went ahead with the act itself."[75] Two things will result in losing the direction when ready for action are either hesitation or eagerness. "It is possible to direct one's body or part of it towards a certain point and yet to withhold movement. Similarly, it is possible to direct one's body towards a certain point and to move it in space towards that point or to any other point of the compass."[76] When we are well directed, we do not hesitate once we have decided to act. Hesitation causes one to get tense at the critical moment of 'doing.' Eagerness, a kind of overreaction, muddies the goal and causes additional misuse that will have the performer's attention. The eagerness even pushes one to jump in trying something without any preparation but actions only.

People always say "try again and try harder!! You can do it." But, one is compelled to ask "how long does it take to succeed?" Or perhaps one stumbles upon a superb performance by accident, but is unable to re-create it after long term trying. "When at first you don't succeed, never try again, at least not in the same way,"[77] wrote Patrick Macdonald, an accomplished Alexander teacher trained directly by F. M. One should modify the direction the second time we try again. For example, "Try again with less anxiety. This time, play

75. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 72.

76. Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique*, 5.

77. Ibid., 1.

with your free legs." *Non-doing* the same thing again and again, we can more easily release ourselves to try something new the next time.[78] True freedom and ease in movement resides in *non-doing*.

78. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 73.

CHAPTER THREE

APPLICATION OF ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE IN CORTOT'S STUDY EDITION OF CHOPIN'S OP. 10 SET

Alfred Cortot established a systematic method of approaching technique in his study edition of Chopin's Etudes. He endeavored to craft a concept of progressive practicing that rationally reduced difficult passages to their basic elements in order to solve and refine technical problems. He thought that "a musician needs to build his craft from the ground up: starting with single sounds, adding simple scales and arpeggios, continuing on to easy pieces, and further on to complex pieces, these last retaining in their core the simplicity of their building-blocks."[79]

The Alexander Technique also aims to develop the ability to direct thoughts to action from simple steps to complex movements. Every complex movement combines many steps, each step in the procedure, though, remains simple and easy to analyze and learn.[80] As a result, the Technique helps people release unnecessary muscular tension when performing each action, restoring the functioning of the whole self along the laws of Nature, according to Alexander's viewpoints. Thus, these ideas merit a discussion to learn how to use the self well when working with the severe challenges of Chopin's Etudes—something that tests even the most talented and adept pianist. Here, Cortot's preparatory exercises will be used as examples.

79. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 157.

80. Ibid., 158.

Op, 10 no. 1 in C Major

This study emphasizes fast right-hand arpeggios in extended harmonic shapes. It requires stretches of the fingers with extremely quick movement over the full extent of the keyboard. The left hand plays a different role in that it accompanies the right hand with a long bass line in octaves. When studying this piece, a pianist should know the stepwise procedure for training the right hand to stretch as soon as possible to obtain the correct position of each figuration without stiffening the arms.

Before touching the keyboard, a warm-up exercise will free the arms. This can be done sitting down. When seated in front of the keyboard, the weight of the torso is to be delivered downward onto the sitting bones. These are located towards the base of the two pelvic bones, rather than outward towards the thigh bones. It is then necessary to free the legs, knees, heels and feet; just letting them "be there," instead of controlling them in precise position. *Free* is the thought used to consciously direct the body in a healthy way rather than in a habitual manner. Letting them "be there" with their natural workings is to "stop wanting to control." The wish to control the legs, knees, heels and feet does not lend itself however to the feeling of security, but instead triggers a set of habitual misuses along with unnecessary tensions in the body.

After learning how to free the lower part of the body, the pianist should sit toward the edge of the bench. Here, she can learn to balance on her sitting bones for more mobility and stability when needed. While seated in this manner, the pianist must maintain awareness of the spine, not slumping or hollowing the back, but directing her Primary Control. She then needs to let the neck and head move forward and up, allowing the

back to lengthen and widen along the vertebrae, one after the other, then all together. That is how we verbalize various directions for the Primary Control before the action.

Once there is balance between head, neck, and back while sitting, the pianist can begin to raise her right hand up and onto the keyboard, but she does not play any key just yet. She first needs to free the right shoulder and arm from unnecessary tension, moving this arm from the middle of the keyboard to the extreme right edge, then back to the middle horizontally. When traveling over the keyboard, the pianist can practice alternately stretching the fingers wide open and closing them back into a fist. Next, she is to make well-coordinated use of the upper body and the whole self, becoming aware of *things not to do*.[81] For instance, when reaching over to the extreme right side of the keyboard, the pianist must not tighten the torso and also not stiffen the arms. She must let the upper body move sideways while balancing on the sitting bones and loosening the arms. There are four main joints in the arm instead of three as is commonly understood. The one always missed is the sternoclavicular joint (the joint between the sternum and collarbone).[82] The other three are the shoulder joint, elbow joint and wrist joint. The structure of the arms begins from the collarbones and shoulder blades, not from the upper arms. When working the arms using the sternoclavicular joint, the arms are physically longer and more flexible than is generally understood. For the elbow joint, it is important to not let the elbow move inwards. Instead, it must move away from the body and

81. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 102.

82. Barbara Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know about the Body: The Practical Application of Body Mapping to Making Music*, revised ed. (Oregon: Andover Press, 2000), 43.

travel over the keyboard with fingers leading. In becoming aware of what not to do with the torso, arms and joints, pianists are then able to use Inhibition (the conscious thoughts of *thing not to do)* to control habitual misuses of the body before they are employed. While keeping the right hand moving over the keyboard, now play the sonorous octave bass line with the silent right-hand motion. Once the left-hand octave motion interferes with one of the preceding steps in sitting preparation, it is important to stop for a while and review the directions all the way back to the first step, sitting with well-coordinated Primary Control. The pianist must strive for freedom of movement and awareness of habitual misuses of the body, as mentioned above, while performing this warm-up exercise. Doing such an exercise each time before playing this etude is helpful in releasing muscular tensions.

Likewise, focusing on Cortot's preparatory exercises (see Fig. 3-1) is necessary to overcoming technical difficulties. He simplifies the right-hand figurations from the first two measures into five different patterns with the same C major harmonic format. Each pattern is rhythmically altered using duplet or triplet patterns.

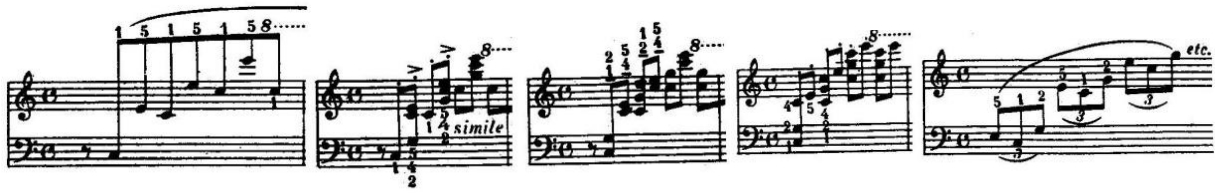


Figure 3-1 Each pattern for three octaves up and down

For these figurations (Fig. 3-1), different degrees of stretches and different interval leaps between fingers are required. Even with a small hand, the pianist can be in harmony with the mechanism of the

keyboard. The pianist Heinrich Neuhaus, teacher of Emil Gilels, says that "Small hands with a small stretch have quite obviously to make much greater use of wrist, forearm and shoulder…."[83] The pianist should focus on the interval of the tenth (C to E) in first exercise of Fig. 3-1. Each finger in turn should become a pivot for the next note as the arm travels with a flexible wrist and floating elbow.[84] If the wrist is stiffened for rotation, the fingers will tighten also and not be able to move quickly up to performance tempo. In this case, more notes will be missed because of misuse of the self, resulting in technical unreliability.[85] From here, the pianist needs to remember the sense the freedom, confidence and pleasure just performed minutes ago in warm-up exercise. Only then can s/he direct the same principle to Cortot's exercises without losing Primary Control and good use of the whole self. In doing this, the pianist will finally achieve what she wants to achieve.

Op, 10 no. 2 in A Minor

This etude is a technical study focusing on a rapid chromatic scale played throughout the piece by the weakest fingers—the third, fourth and fifth—of the right hand. The complete right hand part is the chromatic melody accompanied by chord attacks played by the first and second fingers. The left hand plays a simple alternating bass note and chord accompaniment. The technical difficulties to overcome in this etude are in

83. Heinrich Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, trans. K. A. Leibovitch (London: Kahn & Averill, 2007), 109.

84. Harold Taylor, *The Pianist's Talent: A New Approach to Piano Playing Based on the Principles of F Matthias Alexander and Raymond Thiberge* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2002), 89.

85. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 243.

achieving firmness and even playing with the weakest fingers, moving with quick and *sempre legato* action in chromatic scale degrees up and down the keyboard.

Cortot suggested that the right hand should be thought of as divided into two parts for their different muscular actions and functioning: Part A is the active element of the piece, the chromatic melody, played with the weaker fingers (3rd, 4th, or 5th); Part B is the accompanying element played with the remaining fingers.[86] Before practicing with real notes, the pianist should understand what the physical relationships are between the fingers and whole arm, and how each part of the hand functions. There are two major bones in the forearm: the ulna and radius (see Fig. 3-2). The ulna is the bone lined up with the pinky side of the forearm. The forearm also uses the ulna as an axis to rotate on in order to make the palm move down and up. The other bone is the radius, the bone on the thumb side of the forearm. The radius is somewhat like the ulna, only it involves the 2nd, 3rd and 4th fingers. About the wrist, there are eight bones associated with the carpal tunnel. If those little bones remain healthy and work with each other safely, the pianist can move the hand in any direction with great mobility and freedom.

86. Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Alfred Cortot, 14.

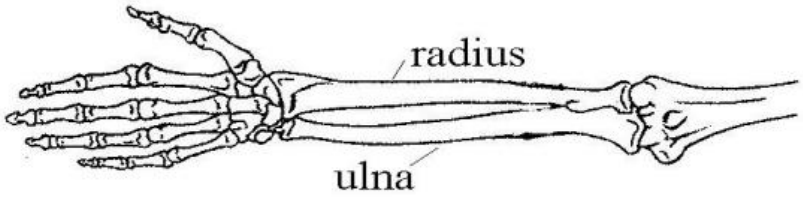


Figure 3-2 The skeleton of a forearm and hand

Knowing this, the pianist should be able to sense the relationship between the use and functioning of the hand and application of these ideas in preparatory exercises. Cortot suggests using a two-finger group (3-4, 4-3, 4-5, and 5-4) or three-finger group (3-4-5, 4-5-3 and 5-3-4) in the C chromatic scale up and down. Regarding the *legato* action, he suggests "avoid[ing] any exaggerated raising of the fingers, or contraction or stiffness of the wrist,…[but instead, suggests remaining mindful of] the fingers not playing [yet staying] completely relaxed"[87] when meeting various finger crossings. Pianists are to think about how the fingers are supported with strength by the ulna and radius, not the knuckles while working on the chromatic scale with Cortot's fingering groups, so the fifth finger is made stronger by its relationship to the ulna and the same goes for the rest of the fingers by their relationship to the radius.[88] When she can play with ease in different fingering combinations, s/he can add the accompaniment with their thumb and 2nd finger.

87. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 14.

88. Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know about the Body*, 68.

The accompanied part should be played with a light tone, like that of a *pizzicato* articulation. It is also important to imagine the chords being plucked rather than struck, like a string player would do.[89] Before pressing down on the chord for each downbeat and top melody, the pianist should pause a second to prepare the place where the double notes are played and think of a way she can articulate the hand as well. (see Fig. 3-3).

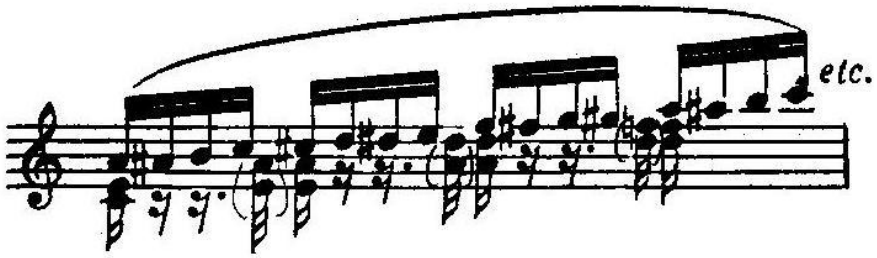


Figure 3-3 Excerpt from Chopin*, 12 Studies, Op. 10 no 2*, ed. Cortot

Upon understanding how the ulna and radius function in the hand, the pianist will acquire support from them as well as the ability to move the fingers with greater ease. To put an end to working with the fingers mechanically, which creates unnecessary tensions in the arms and shoulders, it is important to visualize and prepare for the motion or gesture each finger needs to articulate before acting on it. The pauses before each chord in Fig. 3-3 provide space to adjust the fingers, hands, and arms as needed. Here, each break is to be used to direct the whole self and the localized parts, prepare for the next action, and play deliberately when facing the difficult passages.

89. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 15.

Op, 10 no. 3 in E Major

The technical training in this study is similar to that of no. 2. Polyphonic and *legato* expressions can come across perfectly, depending on how well the tone-value of each finger can be created.[90] The right hand plays a double role in the top melodic line and inner accompaniment, counterpoint to the crossing-accent bass line by the left hand. In this slow *cantabile* etude, the main melody should be played with more color and expression than the other textures.[91]

Cortot uses some preparatory exercises to improve the independence of each finger (see Fig. 3-4). He also points out that "a rule must be followed without fail while practicing this polyphonic technique: i.e. the weight of the hand should lean towards the fingers which play the predominant musical part, and the muscles of the fingers playing an accessory part should be relaxed and remain limp."[92]

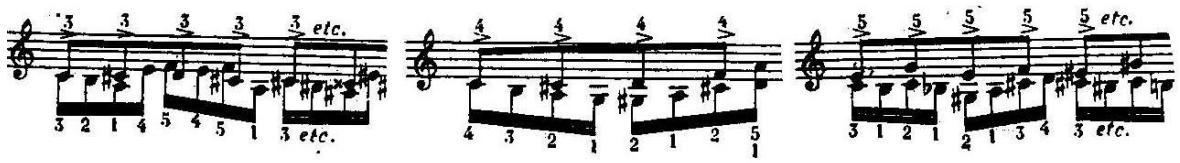


Figure 3-4 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 3,* ed. Cortot

Cortot's ideas can also be adjusted with more of an Alexanderian technique. The firmness of each finger comes from good use of the hands, arms, and shoulders. The weight of the hand should be supported by the

90. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 20.

91. Taylor, *The Pianist's Talent*, 90.

92. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 20.

back. When the weight of the hand leans toward the fifth finger for the top singing line, the elbow should shift outward, rotating the forearm, and freeing the wrist and upper arm. Knowing this, and mindful that these motions are small and nuanced, gentle movements are especially useful in articulating this etude in its relatively slow tempo.

In making the melodic line as expressive as desired, the pianist should also know how to transmit pressure from one finger to the next in order to create the *legato* playing s/he wishes to convey. Before trying this on the keyboard however, it is essential to first understand that pressure to the fingers comes from gravity of the finger itself and also the whole arm, and not from the attack of an individual finger. "If [you] try to make use of 'finger work' in order to amplify the upper notes, [your] playing will become dry, colourless and clumsy."[93] Therefore each finger is to be used in turn as a pivot point to prepare the action for the next key and transmit pressure to the next finger. Each tiny motion of fingers in the transmission of pressure requires all other localized actions of hands, arms, and shoulders to be well-coordinated.

Cortot also mentions that when practicing this polyphonic technique (see Fig. 3-4), "the muscles of the fingers playing an accessory part should be relaxed and remain limp."[94] But relaxation of the fingers does not mean "floppy." Even for an accessory part, the fingers require normal muscle tone to be held up and perched on a key. Practiced pianists press down on a key with a minimum of necessary tension, especially if the action is light. Furthermore, they are able to preconceive the degree of necessary tension for each finger,

93. Taylor, *The Pianist's Talent*, 91.

94. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 20.

then allow it to remain alive in order to play with the degree of volume and variety of tone color they choose to exhibit in this polyphonic study.

Op, 10 no. 4 in C-sharp Minor

The main texture of this etude is written with tumultuous sixteenth-note runs passing from one hand to the other. Sometimes there is a transition for the pianist to prepare a hand for another rapid run, but sometimes not. Among the difficulties to overcome in this study is how to switch hand motion from a conjunct to a disjunct position quickly, without interfering with evenness of the fingers. It is also in understanding how to transfer the balanced tone constantly when passing from one hand to the other hand.

Cortot wrote the first exercise (see Fig. 3-5) to practice sixteenth-note runs in semitone and whole-tone figurations. This is a conjunct motion similar to the idea of bar 1 with the right hand and bar 5 with the left hand.

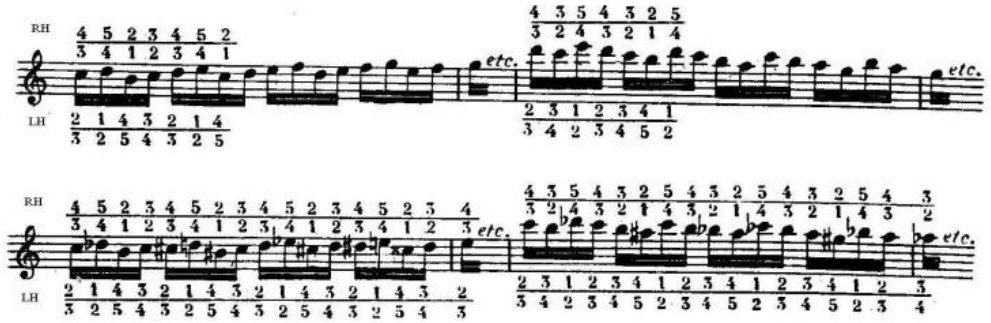


Figure 3-5 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 4*, ed. Cortot

When practicing these conjunct runs in a quick tempo, it is helpful to imagine holding a small ball in the hand with a natural curved shape and without tension in each knuckle. The wrist is allowed to move up a little bit higher than usual in order to pass the note between the black key and the white key within a small space. Following a fingering pattern, for example 3-4-1-2, on the very first figuration with the right hand, the next step is to make a small contoured circle with the hand, wrist, forearm and elbow, moving with a slight up and down motion in the upper arm. If these actions happen simultaneously and smoothly without interfering with Primary Control, the pianist can be sure that localized parts, and even the whole body, are being well-directed by their mind and used well.

Before getting into bar 3 in this etude, pianists should learn how to shift the motion from a conjunct to a disjunct position quickly. Learning *inhibition* when something is desired, wanted or wished for is a sure way to achieve freedom and let go of conscious control in finger work. In the conjunct exercise, time should be spent getting used to the hand position. It is not possible to jump into a totally different motion without re-directing thoughts. As a reminder, *inhibition* means taking a moment before execution of an action to re-direct thoughts away from habitual misuses of the body. That is, the pianist should stop *end-gaining*, which causes misuse of the self and neglects other possible means to achieve the goal.

Before getting into the disjunct position in bar 3, it is necessary to conceive the gesture needed for the figuration. The pianist should use inhibition to let go of motivations to “get the notes right” and instead “well-direct” good use of the whole self and active parts of the body, such as an arm or hand, with their mind.

Alexander believed in the self's innate wisdom to get things right if it is allowed to do so without undue force or eagerness. Then she is to play bar 3, letting the fingers go without hesitation. Subsequently the pianist will learn how not to worry about the outcome of what is played, and instead enjoy the sensation of "uncontrol" as well as the progress of achieving freedom.[95] The pianist should not be afraid to go wrong. Soon, the shifting motions from a conjunct to a disjunct position will come out as smoothly and naturally as she likes them to be by well-directing from mind without misuse of the body (i.e. over contraction) and possible injury or discomfort.

Returning to the difficulty the pianist faces in how to consistently transfer a balanced tone from one hand to another, an idea from the Alexander Technique which may help to balance the hands is called the *bilateral transfer*. According to this concept, "the use of the left arm always affects the use of the right arm, and vice versa."[96] Once acquiring good co-ordinated use of the right-hand, the left hand should be able to function in the same manner. It will then feel increasingly easy to train either hand with the mind. In transferring the balanced tone from hand to hand with similar sixteen-note runs in this etude, it is important to remember that both hands function in the same way when working. They just happen to be in different registers and playing at different times. If the right hand works well, then the left-hand should too. This is the concept you choose to trust, then both hands can make it with the solid mind.

95. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 76-77.

96. Ibid., 139.

Op, 10 no. 5 in G-flat Major

Nicknamed the Black Key Etude, this piece is one of Chopin's most popular works. This study is characterized by its black key arpeggiated melody played by the right hand throughout the entire piece, except for one F-natural in bar 66 that is necessary for the harmonic progression. The left hand has its own melodic line within a number of chords and octaves. The touch here must be light and even with sparkling action for both hands. In this etude, the fingers should be trained to become familiar with the black-key hand position, just like Cortot recommends in his study edition.

Cortot later left pianists with a number of challenging exercises (see Fig. 3-6) for black key progressions. By practicing these variants, the pianist should learn how to control both hands with greater ease before getting into the actual study.

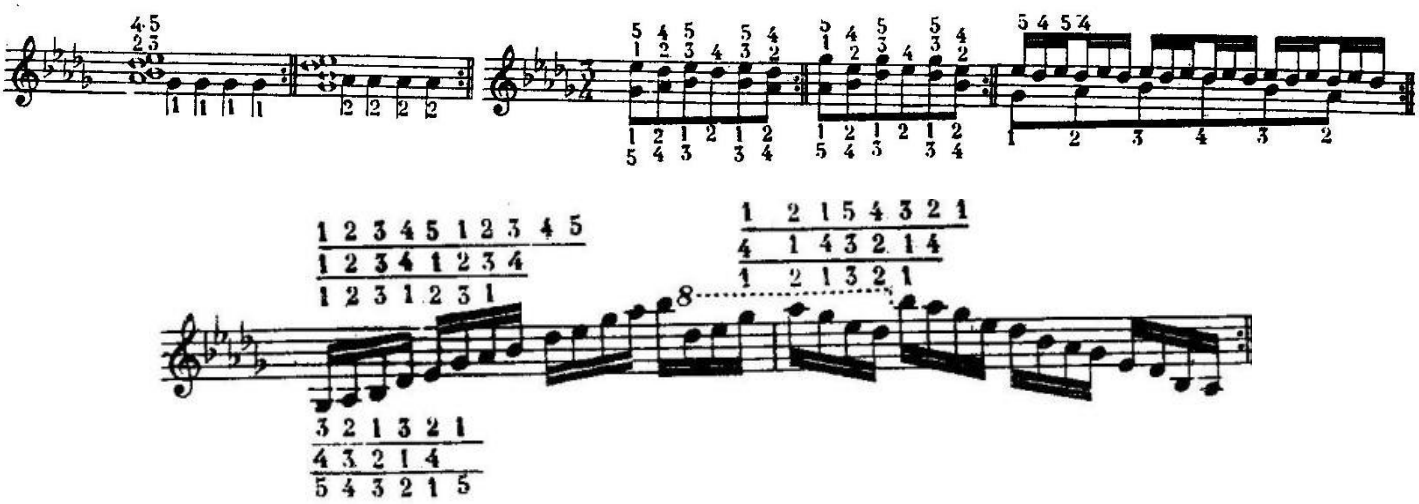


Figure 3-6 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 5*, ed. Cortot

Of course, these exercises will work at a slow tempo without missing notes. But how will it play when using a faster tempo, or performance tempo, as it is written in *Vivace*? In this case, attempting to practice harder on "finger work" in a quick tempo may result in misuse of the hands and body. Work on this study can easily lend itself to habitual lifting of the shoulders, curving of the back, shortening of the back and contracting of the head when over-focusing on fingering in order to perfect performance. As a result, this creates excessive tension in the whole self. Here, *faulty sensory awareness* could be one of the reasons you could misuse your body in habitual way.

Some practitioners may assert that if the piece was composed in G major, it would be easier to play. That is because most pianists are more used to playing the G major arpeggio pattern more than the black key arpeggio patterns for this piece. Therefore, there is a tendency to perform gestures with the accumulated muscle memory which has been experienced many times already. From here, hypothetically speaking, these pianists might tend to practice this Black Key etude using habitual experience applied from familiarity with G major. The player is unaware of the fact that she has reverted to an incorrect habitual experience and misuse of the body results in something Alexander calls *faulty sensory perception.*

To improve sensory awareness, the pianist must stop playing in a manner which "feels right" (the G major). Go Back to Cortot's black-key exercises again as if for the very first time. "When you change your use, you go inevitably through new experiences and sensations."[97] Explore the hand positions and the

97. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 44.

distances between each intervals for the black key as a fresh experience. As a result, the totally new experience of learning black-key positioning will consciously awaken the mind and re-educate the fingers with new muscle experiences. In the end, the pianist will be better able to direct sensory awareness with new learning experiences and more reliable guidance. The Black Key etude is not something tough to overcome; it is just something new to get used to.

Op, 10 no. 6 in E-flat Minor

Like Op. 10 no. 3, this is a slow *cantabile* etude that can be thought of as a passionate lament. This etude features a constant counterpoint running through the middle of the texture. Three distinct voices here require individual tone color to accomplish an intense polyphony. The upper voice is a mournful and flowing melody supported by the lower bass line. A thoughtful and chromatic inner voice then weaves between the other voices to maintain a continuous wave of sixteenth-notes.

From Cortot's notations, the particular difficulty in this study is the individual tone of each simultaneously sounding melodic line, and the balancing between lines. Each voice should preserve its own timbre and its own freedom of rhythm according to the part concerned.[98] If one just plays the top melody, together with the lower bass line, it is not hard to project sound outward with the full weight of the fingers. The main point here is to learn how to let the chromatic inner voice join in without interfering with the

98. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 40.

graceful flowing of the top melody and sustained bass line. Cortot recommended an exercise (see Fig. 3-7) that doubles the inner voice in order to achieve a special attack for each sixteenth note.

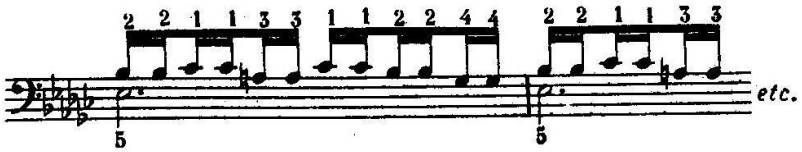


Figure 3-7 Excerpt from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 6*, ed. Cortot

The chromatic inner voice is difficult to play evenly and with expressive intensity.[99] It is noteworthy to remember here that fifth fingers are stronger than one usually considers them to be because the ulna bone, lined up with the pinky side of the hand, helps the little fingers maintain strength. In Cortot's exercise of Fig. 3-7, the pianist can press the fifth finger down on each downbeat, release the tension from the fifth finger and just hold it effortlessly. Then, immediately transfer the strength of the fifth finger to the inner voice with proper weight given to each finger as needed for a gentle articulation of each note. This creates an intense (not too intense) chromatic wave according to the necessary strength of fingers. While attacking the repeated note in the inner voice in exercise of Fig. 3-7, the forearm and wrist should rotate for the repeating finger. The inner voice will therefore sound vivid and clear due to the natural workings of the hand motions and proper support from the pinky side of the ulna. The timbre created for the chromatic inner voice depends on three things: 1) the range of the rotation, 2) how much weight is used to press the finger down, and 3) what

99. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 40.

quality of action is used by the finger. If she knows well the physical relationship between hands and arms when functioning in each tiny motion, the pianist can then produce the tone s/he likes.

Op, 10 no. 7 in C Major

This study has a special technical difficulty in its perpetually changing intervals. Many pianists may think that progress is harder with such a tempo as that of *Vivace*. The right-hand intervals alternate between smaller intervals (2^{nd}, 3^{rd}, 4^{th} or 5^{th}) and extended intervals (larger than previous one) with the lower note repeated. Another difficulty to overcome is how to treat the lower repeating note lightly, but still perceptible in a succession of double-note figurations.

In Chapter 2, I discussed how Alexander discovered what he was doing to himself that caused his vocal problems. He developed a procedure to isolate his actions step by step and master the difficulties one after another. This idea can also be applied to solving the technical difficulties of perpetually changing intervals in this etude. For instance, take the opening of this etude using the right-hand figuration only (see Fig. 3-8):

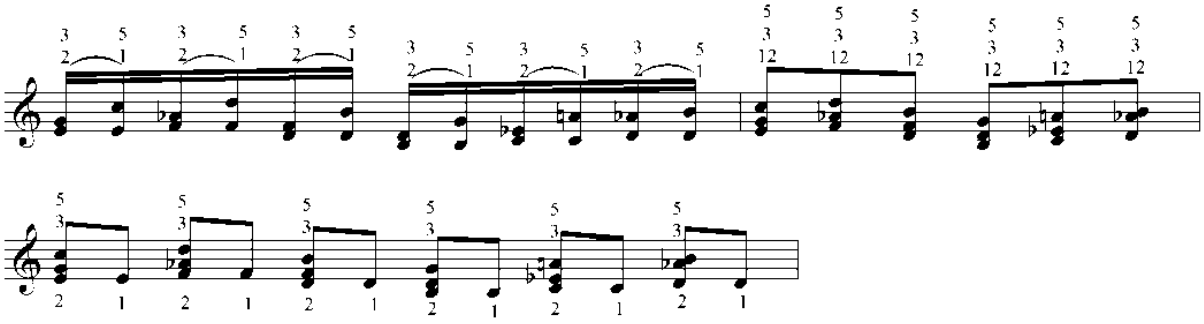


Figure 3-8 Excerpt of Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 7*, bar 1

From the standpoint of compositional writing, each basic musical figure contains universal variables, such as rhythm, articulation, harmony, melodic contour, pulse, meter…etc. Which elements change and which elements stay the same need to be analyzed in order to clarify the essence of this piece before practicing it on the keyboard.[100] Check the right-hand figuration in the first measure for example (see Fig. 3-8). The rhythm, articulation, pulse and meter stay the same (while the sixteenth-note figurations are also maintained throughout the entire piece). If two sixteenth notes are in a unit, there is a single chord change for each eighth. (see 1st and 2nd mm. of Fig. 3-8). The only variables that change on each eighth beat are harmony and melodic contour. All other elements, including rhythm, articulations and pulse do not change. Practicing the harmonic progressions a few times allows the pianist to become familiar with the hand position change while both the first and second fingers hold the lower note (2nd m. of Fig. 3-8). Once aware of the composer's choice of variables, the pianist can sense the simplicity of the rules and set the rules of variables in her mind before applying them. She can then continue to recall the harmonic changes, this time separating the first and second fingers for the repeating action (3rd m. of Fig. 3-8). These two fingers of repeating notes are to alternate quickly and effortlessly as if they are not noticed. If there is trust that the fingers can be directed and ordered with a simple thought from the mind, the repeating note will be there, clearly and precisely. Also helpful are the Alexanderian steps listed below which should be followed when practicing Fig. 3-8: (1) Be aware of Primary Control, the relationship between head, neck and back; (2) Be

100. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 235.

mindful of the variables that should change in the figure; (3) Before directing activity, the pianist needs to inhibit habitual practices that result in unconscious rushing; (4) The pianist must direct from the mind where the position of each chord is and how the finger acts while repeating notes; and finally, (5) She needs to act and play without hesitation. Progressing through these points step by step will help the pianist know well what she practices.

Returning to Cortot's exercises in harmonic progressions (see Fig. 3-9), the pianist can try to play them using a quick tempo but choose to pause a while before the harmony changes. The pause offers more time to prepare for the next action and direct the fingers where to go before each change. That is what Alexander called "think of, in silence." Good preparations before actions secure the good use of self.

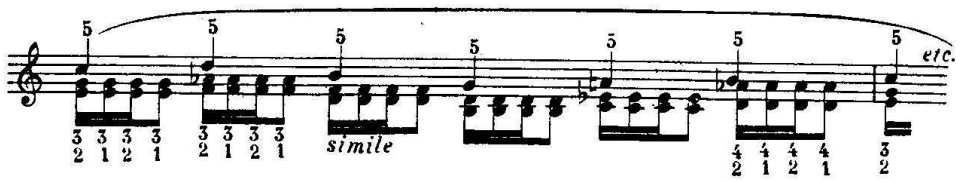


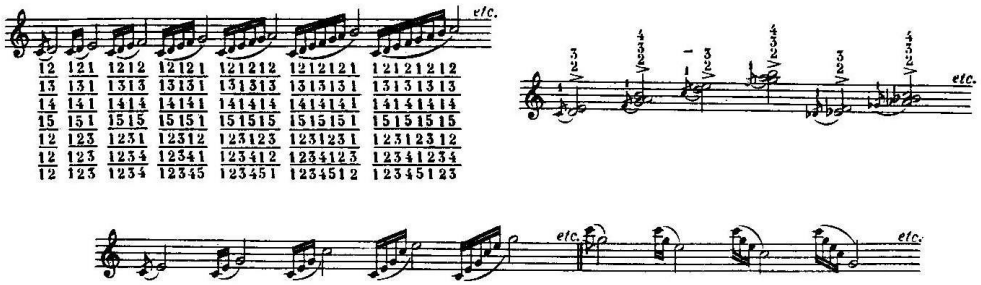
Figure 3-9 Excerpt from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 7*, ed. Cortot

Op, 10 no. 8 in F Major

After the light-hearted and delicate Etude *no. 7*, comes a sunny fanfare. It begins with a brilliant trill in the right-hand that overflows into rapid sixteenth-note runs along the length of the keyboard. As with *no. 7*, the left hand contains the primary melody. The right-hand figuration is a scale/arpeggio combination with an

accented attack on each downbeat of the four-semi-quaver groups. The particular difficulty here is in making the right-hand runs smooth and even in *forte* dynamic without interfering with hand crossings/shifts.

In Cortot's edition (see Fig. 3-10), he stressed the importance of making good passing movements for the fingers when studying virtuosic pieces, especially in the functioning of the thumb. "This particular movement of the thumb, [passing the thumb under the other fingers], which serves as multiplicator to the other fingers, must not impair the evenness of tone in the melodic line of the phrase or run, or modify the position of the fingers in the successive hand-shiftings which result from it, or cause any slackening of speed."[101]



*make use of the fingerings given in exercise 1 of Figure

Figure 3-10 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 8*, ed. Cortot

For these exercises, the thumb must be brought closer to the keyboard with a gentle horizontal movement of the forearm and hand when moving in ascending or descending directions. Freeing the wrist

101. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 51.

will also make the shitfs smoother and more even. But special attention needs to be paid to the mechanism of the thumb. As is already known, the second, third, fourth and fifth fingers have three joints that enable them to move at varying angles. The pianist must then observe the thumb, which is commonly thought to contain two joints. If this is so, then executing the thumb movements in Fig. 3-10 will cause the thumb to tighten, affecting the flexibility and dexterity of the other four fingers, and causing the whole arm to become fatigued. Because you are misusing your thumb and the same goes with other fingers, this will restrict the flexibility of each finger in its movements and possibly create soreness in your arm as well. However, the physical structure of the thumb actually includes three joints. The one generally ignored is the proximal joint in the wrist. This is the key joint that frees the thumb to move in any direction and at any angle if the pianist is aware of it. Employment of all three of these joints when using the thumb will allow the pianist to feel more secure and comfortable to make shifts in this study of scales and arpeggios.[102]

Op, 10 no. 9 in F Minor

This etude features the simplicity of melodic lyricism. It is a highly expressive work with a dark, agitated feeling. A simple lyrical melody flows on the top line and is accompanied by extended broken-chord figurations in the left-hand. This harmonic pattern is often expanded to cover more than one octave. It requires stretching the fingers with extremely quick movements, in its extended hand positions it is similar to the technical difficulty of the right hand in the earlier *Op. 10, no 1* etude. The difference between them exists

102. Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know about the Body*, 69.

in the functioning and the motions of the arm and shoulder, which are more flexible and wider in range in this etude. This study requires such movements to facilitate the succession of wildly alternating intervals within a single broken-chord figuration.

Take the first harmonic figuration, for example, in bar 1. Divide these six sixteenth-notes into two groups: the first three in one group and last four in another (see Fig. 3-11).

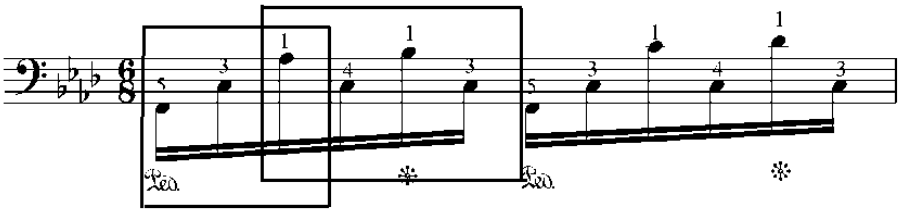


Figure 3-11 Excerpt of Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 9*, bar 1

In order to become familiar with the hand motions and chord positions, the first group is to be practiced several times by the pianist. The same process should then be applied to the second group. Before playing the complete figuration the pianist must roll the first three notes and hold the third note (A-flat) for a second in order to visualize the motion and position that will be executed for the rest of the pattern. Precise hand actions must flow from the mind rather than muscle memory in articulating the fingering. The execution will feel more secure because the focus is on already '*being there*' as you act on what is previously conceived.

However, in Cortot's commentary, he notes that the pianist's problems are secondary, "far more important is the problem pertaining to the general interpretation of the composition."[103] The challenge here is to achieve a particular tone quality that brings out the lyricism of the music and nature of the flow. Pedro de Alcantara asserts that "for a well-co-ordinated original,…naturalness is the very source of his originality."[104] The true expression of the music comes from the musician's originality as well. The Alexander Technique teaches people how to search for freedom of the self and how to restore true originality by following the laws of Nature. Once this freedom is achieved, the beauty of the music arrives on its own. Therefore try to *make* oneself to be expressive and to be exciting in performance is to *end-gain* the music-making. Hence, to bring out the lyricism of the music and natural flow, it is essential to establish good use of the self and choose to execute gestures by following the nature of one's physical mechanism. That is to say, music should flow spontaneously, if pianists simply stop misusing the self and search for freedom.

Op, 10 no. 10 in A-flat Major

As for technical difficulty, this etude is not quite so challenging. Obviously it requires extensions of both hands for the wide open broken-chord figurations, however, it is quite playable upon a second look at the compositional syntax. A bit of practice on some preparatory exercises, the pianist can adeptly get to the essence of the music.

103. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 61.

104. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 210.

At first, it helps to take a look at the right hand figuration in bar 1, temporarily taking off all slurs and accents. It is a two-eighth-note pattern in a broken-chord octave figuration that is not too difficult to perform using a normal-sized hand. What is tricky here is adding off-beat slurs without breaking down the ascending octave motion. With original articulations, the finger work can progress well in the first few measures, but it begins to feel insecure and off-balance due to the incessant off-beat pulsing. To consequently *put* the original slurs directly in the figuration and practice mechanically is *end-gaining*. If this happens, the well-coordinated movement just achieved from the octave motion before can easily collapse, triggering misuses and unnecessary tensions in other parts of the body. Therefore, the function of an off-beat slur should be treated in an indirect way. In order to do this, it works well to detach the octave chord with a staccato indication on the lower note followed by a *tenuto* (see Fig. 3-12). This way, the same articulations the composer created are addressed while simultaneously maintaining the natural octave motion. This functions in almost the same way as syncopated slurs do, but keeps the natural octave patterns intact. To put the original slurs directly in the figuration and practice them mechanically is *end-gaining* (once again!). Conversely, to consider the best possible means of doing this via an indirect procedure, as transcribed in Fig. 3-12, towards an end is what is meant by the aforementioned *means-whereby* process in Chapter 2.

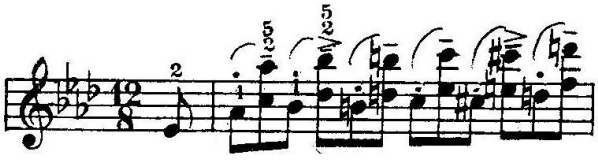


Figure 3-12 Excerpt of Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 10*, bar 1

If a performer wants to make this etude flow easier, she will need to employ her hands with greater flexibility. To accomplish this, Cortot puts more focus on the wrist: "[We should] restrict the use of the wrist to its real object, i.e., to aid the motion of the fingers by its flexibility, but not to command them."[105] Explaining this idea in light of the Alexander Technique, Alexander points to the fact that all parts of the body are interdependent yet united. When a tiny gesture changes its use, one should adjust other parts of the body to be in harmony with the changing of localized action. Before discussing the interrelationship among the localized parts, once again, the Primary Control (the relationship between head, neck, and back) has priority over all other considerations. The action of the finger, wrist and arm should be executed with well-coordinated Primary Control. In other words, good use of the activity parts comes from natural support provided by Primary Control. Carry on the awareness of the Primary Control and then focus on the relationship between fingers and wrist as Cortot recommended. The wrist can be freed and flexed easily but tends to get too relaxed, consequently losing its function without help from the fingers. Ideally, the wrist is well-supported by fingers and arm, and floats in the air in order to have it function well with the weight and gravity of the fingers. Once the pianist is aware of the gravity and strength of each finger, the wrist will achieve its real object and obtain flexibility. When working on the wide open broken-chord figuration in this etude, the key is to sense the interrelation among the arms, fingers and wrists, letting them co-operate with each other to accomplish all movements with ease.

[105]. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 66.

Op, 10 no. 11 in E-flat Major

This etude explores the special technical difficulty of an extended arpeggio in both hands. It is very straightforward, with continuously rolled chords in rapid succession throughout the piece. The melody is usually on the top of each right-hand chord. The general dynamic is a gentle *piano*, except for a few *forte* phrasings, and the ending. This light arpeggiation with rapid wide-spread broken chords ultimately produces a guitar-like effect.

The touch on the rolled chords should be a light attack, like that of plucking a string on a guitar. The destination of each chord is the top note melody. While sweeping the fingers along, the strength of each finger needs to be increased to bring out the top note melody. In order to interpret this study properly, Cortot provides a clearer transcription (see Fig. 3-13):

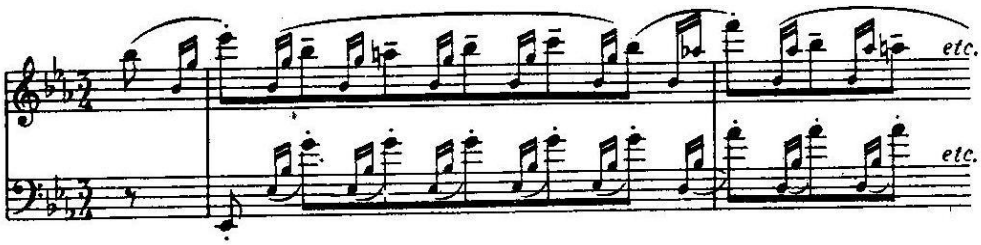


Figure 3-13 Excerpt from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 11*, ed. Cortot

Here, the *tenuto* marking added by Cortot tells the pianist to put more energy and volume on those keys. As mentioned before, the fifth finger is attached to the ulna, aligning with the forearm for support and making the little finger stronger than it seems. Rolling the chords and holding the top note with the support

from forearm will obtain more energy to bring out the melody. From here, strength in the fingers which play the upper notes can be obtained by transmitting energy from the fingers of the lower notes without excessive pressure in the hands. The total mechanism of rolling motions should have *necessary* tension for providing support, but it is important to know how to estimate what degree of tension is enough for the movement. Normally, there is a tendency to play a piece with extra tension because of an eagerness to articulate each note correctly in quick, and even faster tempos. In such a case, "the wrong *kind* and *amount* of tension, in the wrong *place*, for the wrong *length of time*"[106] causes the pianist to complain of tension. In this study, exact (and necessary) tension is needed to project the top melody with proper tonal value. As for the fingers of lower notes, they only need very tiny amounts of tension to sweep over the keys while being supported by the proper amount of tension from the wrist and forearm. When rolling up to the top notes, the tension on the fifth finger should be increased to obtain a bigger sound. This increasing tension can be consciously created by releasing and directing the tension from wrist and forearm to the fifth finger. Then, hold up the top-note finger from the key with that proper tension and with the energy from finger itself. Now, the top melody is projected out with the *necessary* tension, transmitted from correct parts (wrist, forearm and fingers of lower notes). The strength and flexibility of the fingers come from the right type and proper amount of tension, in the right place, for the proper length of time. The pianists should not complain of the tension they process or create, but use that tension in good way to help their performance.

106. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 15.

Op, 10 no. 12 in C Minor

Known as the "Revolutionary Etude," this piece is one of the most significant pieces among Chopin's compositions. It was written around 1830, the year of Poland's failed war against Russia known as the November Uprising. He expressed patriotism for his fatherland, Poland, through this music. The spirit of this etude reflects a *grandioso* atmosphere. The strong beginning chord rings out and is followed by rapid left-hand descending runs with forceful accents on each downbeat. This impassioned opening sets the scene for forceful gestures and high emotional content of the piece.

The left-hand runs are similar to those in *Op. 10 no 8* figurations, combining scales and arpeggios up and down the keyboard. If a pianist can apply effective and comfortable fingerings, it will not be hard to achieve performance tempo with ease as well as a clear articulation. Again, awareness of the natural gravity of each finger should be taken into account for clear articulation. Each finger should then be held up from the key with firmness and strength by using the necessary tension it possesses. Even co-ordination of the whole arm, including the hand, wrist, elbow, upper arm and shoulder, will facilitate the frequent crossings. Once the shifts of position take place, all other parts of the body follow the finger motions and adjust their gestures to be in harmony with the localized action.

The difficulty in this etude is in maintaining the powerful right-hand chords of the melody continuously present throughout the piece. The parallel chords with octaves used in dotted rhythmic patterns, and the chords (in triplets), which create a cross-rhythm in the second half of the etude, builds an intensity and

generates turbulence that challenges the pianist with a sudden and immediate crescendo wave over just a few notes. To this, Cortot remarks that "It is on the noble and vehement fiction of the right hand that depend the beauty and thrilling pathos of this Study."[107] The preparatory exercises (see Fig. 3-14) he recommends for training in the execution of this wide dynamic range can be applied to any kind of scale and arpeggio pattern.

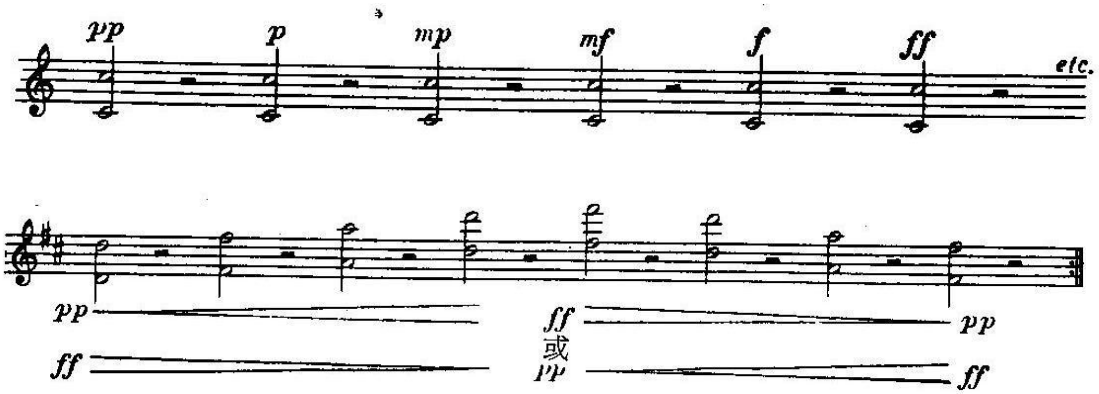


Figure 3-14 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 10 no 12*, ed. Cortot

He further inserts a rest between every octave—not for the pianist to merely stop doing anything, but to instead use the pause for preparation. The goal of placing the rest between octaves is to let the pianist learn how to maintain attention and concentration, even while at rest. The rest does not mean a physical rest between movements, however. In resting, the muscles in fingers, hands, arms, and even the body still maintain their strength and energy in order to be ready for the next play. Therefore, this silent moment is to be used to inhibit habitual practices and direct thoughts toward the next action. This is *delayed*

107. Chopin, *Op. 10, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 81.

continuity—the practice of inserting silences in phrases without losing the continuity of musical thought and forward motion.[108]

What follows from here is a discussion about how a pianist can create a powerful sonority without effort and misuse of the self. Curiously, most pianists have a tendency to raise their shoulders up when playing *forte*. This innate reaction in the shoulders fools the pianist into feeling more secure and confident in the idea that this response is *right* preparation for generating a full and voluminous sound. Unfortunately, the harder the pianist tries to make bigger sounds, the stiffer they become and the more they suffer physically. Their efforts may even sound aggressively sharp and appreciably smaller in volume. In short, the high shoulder gesture produces extra tension in the rest of body that is counterproductive. It results in pulling down the back and contracting the arms, wrists, hands and fingers. With such misuse of these postures, there is inevitable struggle within the body to achieve the powerful energy by *end-gaining*.[109] This *end-gaining*, however, comes from direct intention to play loud without considering the best possible means of achieving that goal.

Rightly, power comes from the back, not from the arms or raising up of the shoulders. It is an awareness of Primary Control and well-co-ordinated relationships within the body that ultimately result in proper alignment of the head, neck and back. What is also important here is letting the back remain free and firm, but not rigid. It must be the well-directed source of strength that transmits power from the back into the arms,

108. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 203.

109. Ibid., 136.

hands and fingers. The more comfortable the back and freer the arms are held, the wider will be the dynamic range that can be reached.

Besides the powerful back, the musicians should sense another source of energy, which lies in the center of the body. The energy core is thought to be in the area of the sacrum (lower spinal area). In Chinese, it is called the *dan tian*, which is two inches below the belly button. This is where all emotion is centered. You simply have to recognize the energy is there and draw from it with your thinking. This means first of all that you have to trust it is there and available to you. It requires you to connect personally and deeply with what you are playing. Once you direct it as you wish, the muscles respond delicately. Great force is not required, yet the result is powerful.[110]

110. Patricia O'Neill, Professor of Voice, Certified Alexander Technique Teacher, School of Music, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA. Interview by Li-Fang Wu, 16 September 2010.

CHAPTER FOUR

APPLICATION OF ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE IN CORTOT'S STUDY EDITION OF CHOPIN'S OP. 25 SET

Op, 25 no. 1 in A-flat Major

This set of etudes opens with a graceful and delicate melody singing out on top of the lower arpeggiated accompaniment. This work features harmonic figurations using rapidly played arpeggios for both hands throughout the piece. These patterns of broken chords are maintained by each hand, usually in contrary motion. The expressive top melody is executed on each downbeat by mostly the fifth finger of the right hand. The melody is simple but not easy to display with a pure tone quality. As recalled by Schumann subsequent to hearing Chopin's performance of this study, "One must imagine somebody playing an Aeolian harp to have an idea of his playing."[111]

Cortot wrote exercises to train the fifth finger and guide its stability and strength. (see Fig. 4-1) These ideas can also be applied to other rhythmic patterns for both hands. Aside from the clear melodic line, the deep lower bass is needed to support the texture of the music.

111. Chopin, *Op. 25, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 7.

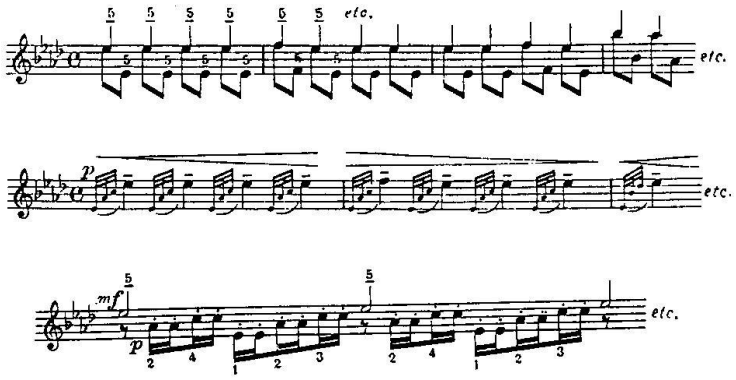


Figure 4-1 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 1*, ed. Cortot

When working on the exercises in Fig. 4-1, the pianist should concentrate on how to project the outer notes with firmness, and touch the inner voice lightly with consistency of tone. Before practicing, it is important to learn how to direct the arms with well-supported Primary Control while standing and sitting. Alexander pointed out some distinct ways of using the arms:

> When standing, people whose co-ordination is least developed point their palms forwards, the elbows in towards the body, the thumbs sticking outwards. The average modern man or woman stands with palms towards the body, elbows slightly backwards, thumbs forwards. Well-co-ordinated men and women stand with palms turned backwards, elbow slightly bent and pointing outwards, thumbs towards body.[112]

Be aware of the tendencies when working the arms and hands and establish the coordinative relationships according to the truly natural posture. Return to the Fig. 4-1. When practicing these exercises in slow motion, the elbow is to point slightly outward to support the pinky side of the hands, and the wrist is to point inward according to the angle of the elbow. This is the natural posture when the arms are pronated,

112. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 130.

based on Alexander's viewpoint. The same idea goes with sitting at the piano. When ready to touch the keyboard in pronation, there should be awareness of Primary Control with elbow outward and wrist inward, naturally poised.

For the second exercise in Fig. 4-1, Cortot reminds the pianist that "great care should be taken not to replace the action required of the fingers by a movement of the hand."[113] In other words, as is usual, the fingers will not move easily and freely without the help of the hand and arm. The hand should move in the shape of a half circle above the keyboard to let the finger roll the chord from the lowest note to the highest. When articulating this motion, the wrist and forearm will rotate in the same direction according to the hand motion. Again, there should be the awareness of Primary Control with that localized motions. It is this disciplined interdependence among upper body mechanisms that smoothes the perpetually rolling chords. Back to the commentary of Cortot, why does he instruct the student 'not to replace the finger action by a movement of the hand?' The finger is the part directly touching on the key. It should be supported by the well-coordinated hand, arm and rest of the body. To be clear, the hand cannot *make* the finger act with firmness—even when rotating the hand, wrist and arm really well, the fingers could be simultaneously floppy. To prevent this from happening, first, each finger should be trained with strength in striking the key. The strength comes from the awareness of the weight of the finger itself and gravity pulling down the finger into the key. Then, there should be the support from hand while acting the fingers. A movement of the hand can

113. Chopin, *Op. 25, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 7.

not *make* the finger press down the key—can not "replace the action required of the fingers." But, a well-coordinated movement of the hand can help fingers to function better with confidence. Carry on those ideas when playing the rapid rolling chords. The pianist will have a clear mind to follow Cortot's instructions.

Op, 25 no. 2 in F Minor

Here is a gentle etude with the whispered-like figurations in the right hand. The opening marking, *molto legato*, is achieved by smooth and elegant touches of the fingers. The right-hand melody consists of small-range scale-wise runs and arpeggiated finger crossings. It only requires a graceful motion in the hands and fingers to make smooth runs and shifts, even with the *presto* tempo. Like *Op. 10 no 4* and the *Revolutionary Etude*, it is not hard to make the rapid runs smoothly if comfortable fingerings are found that depend on the individual's usual practice.

Before playing the music, Cortot suggests some finger exercises to secure light motions of the fingers, steadiness of the hand and flexibility of the wrist (see Fig. 4-2).

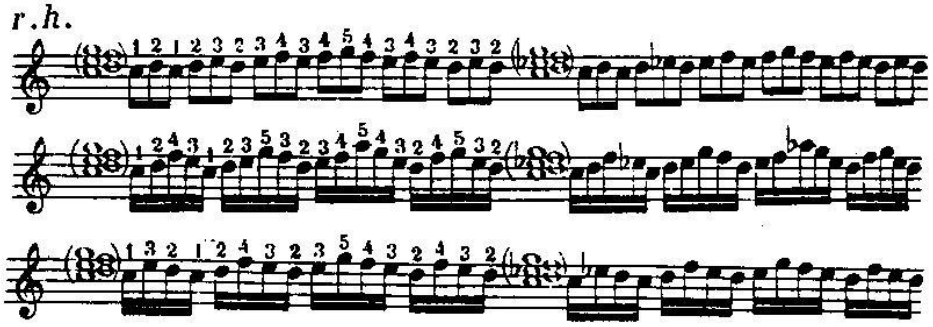


Figure 4-2 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 2*, ed. Cortot

When working on soft small-range runs, achievement of 'free-flowing' motion comes by the arm, at rest, hanging lightly from the shoulder.[114] However, resting does not mean relaxing. If the arm is totally relaxed, it will drape down without any support. Instead, when doing the small scale-wise runs, there should be stillness/calmness of the arm and awareness of the lengthening from shoulder to arm. Besides the free-flowing motion of the arm, practice with music-making should be strongly encouraged. Take the first exercise in Fig. 4-2 for instance. According to the melodic contour in the first exercise, the whole arm will move slightly up and down by following the wave-like pattern in the phrasing. The motion of the arm helps to release extra tensions from the finger work and allows the finger to perform different kinds of articulation. Music-making comes not just from the fingers but also from the help of arm and elbow. In performing, interpretation can be free, natural and spontaneous if the overall self is used appropriately and consciously. One must sense how the body is well-supposed to co-ordinate itself. Letting go of feelings and excitements of passion from inside promotes understanding of the naturalness of this piece and allows the player to achieve "free flow."

Op, 25 no. 3 in F Major

This is a light and spirited etude with interesting rhythmic combinations. Both hands perform a similar rhythmic pattern but with contrary hand motions. Particular rhythms function as an additional embellishment, adhering to both the top melody and bass lines. These inner voices should be presented lightly, as an

114. Taylor, *The Pianist's Talent*, 93.

ornamentation, though with precise values on each note. However, there are some difficulties in balancing these four voices and articulating each rhythmic pattern properly.

Cortot puts forth two basic rhythmical elements to clarify the character of each voice (see Fig. 4-3), and recommends variants of the figuration that focus on the inner voices (see Fig. 4-4).

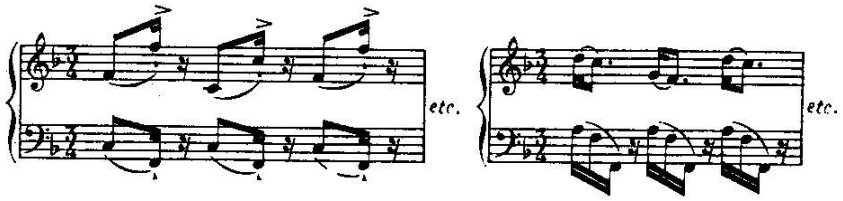


Figure 4-3 Excerpt from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 3*, ed. Cortot

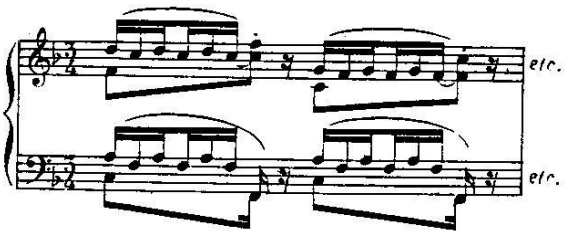


Figure 4-4 Excerpt from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 3*, ed. Cortot

For octave elements, it is important to keep the distance between the thumb and fifth finger fixed while slightly rotating the wrist with a bouncing action. After the first octave is completed, the thumb needs to be directed to the next place without changing the octave distance between thumb and fifth finger whilst traveling. This is, then, a movement for shifting hand positions, not finger work. If consciously aware of the shifting position before moving, the finger will strike the key effortlessly via thoughts (mental order) directed

from the brain. When adding the inner voice in the actual etude, no gesture, which you practiced for previous octave shifting, should be changed.

Leaving the technical problems aside for a moment, how can pianists perform the rhythmic patterns in a more lively manner, rather than considering this piece merely a rhythmic exercise? It is, in fact, easy to play mechanically if the *forward motion* is lost. "Perfect rhythm includes precision, but also energy, dynamism, impetus—what musicians usually call *forward motion*."[115] This etude can be practiced with a metronome when training for perfect rhythmic precision, but the beauty of the music cannot be communicated without artistic nuances expressed by a human being's inner pulse which results from disciplined use of the self. Including *forward motion* as part of the music will allow the rhythm to possess its innate character. A perfect rhythm is flexible in its dynamism according to the essence of the music and the natural pulsing of the performer.

Op, 25 no. 4 in A Minor

This is another work with special rhythmic difficulty. The right hand plays uncompromising off-beat chords against the left-hand's regular bass note plus chord figurations throughout the entire piece. The *staccato* articulation in the left hand is almost constant. The syncopated right-hand chords show more variety of articulations as they mingle *legato* with *staccato* action. Regardless of the articulations, the right hand

115. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 181.

always carries the top-most melody. Sometimes, however, pianists may feel uncomfortable handling the syncopated melodic line with absolute evenness and consistency over the entire piece.

Again, it can be helpful to include the concept introduced just previously, *forward motion*, in this study as well. Everyone has a natural pulsing rhythm within their body that responds to external stimulus. This natural rhythm can be gentle, as when singing a lullaby to a baby. It can also become excited, as in singing for a competitive opera audition. So the intensity of internal rhythmic pulsing is stimulated in proportion to how in sync a person feels with the rhythm of the music and how their body harmonizes with the music during a performance. In this etude, it is easy to fall apart if *forward motion* is lost. Some pianists might argue that they indeed push their fingers forward, but just cannot keep it up for long. This is because their forward motion is only physical, or external. They need to connect with their inborn rhythm to express the music naturally. A good starting place to reconnect with natural rhythm is to play the very first note of each downbeat, left-hand alone, and sense the forward motion that is most comfortable. This is to be done several times. Then, the right hand is added as an upbeat pattern, counterpoint to the downbeat lower bass. Forward motion will emerge when rhythmic pulsing from the lower bass is sensed and internalized. Hence, right-hand movement will no longer be a syncopation issue. It will be part of the duet trailing the regular on-beat bass.

Now, let us turn to a difficulty of the left hand. It is not easy to master the successive jumping back and forth in a fast tempo. Repeating the jumping diligently and believing that hard work will achieve mastery of it is to practice *end-gaining*. In this case, it creates habitual tensions that promote misuse of the body. There is

a strategy, which can be applied to this left-hand practice, proposed by Alexander when facing something challenging: Conception, Inhibition, Direction and Action. First, repeat the lower bass on the downbeat a few times, visualize the position of next chord, and picture the action of the leaping movement. This preparation, the process of Conception, sets up proper positioning of the hands for the next chord before striking it, nearly the same idea Cortot recommended in his study edition. The key here is to keep repeating the lower bass and stop the desire to achieve the top chords right—what is called Inhibition. Over time, the application of Inhibition establishes a new and more conscious mental order, or thought process, with constantly increasing ease and confidence—Direction (from the mind). The way to get rid of missing notes is to use visualization to proceed quickly from one position to the next position instead of focusing on the words *jumping* or *leaping*. In this case, the muscles carry out the mental orders to act without forcing the hand to work hard.[116] For a musician, these four stages of the Alexander principles mean "think, get rid of wrong thoughts, think again, and play."[117] What is most importance is to have necessary time and space between playing/practicing. The Alexander strategy, Conception, Inhibition, Direction and Action, helps pianists to think through the detailed processes you are working on for each basic motion. It needs enough time and space to refine each small step in order to accomplish a complex movement. Being present with the ideas of the Alexander Technique when practicing may not impart perfection right away, but confidence and ease will come with time. Each time this process is repeated, mastery is gradually achieved.

116. Alexander, *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, 117.

117. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 37.

Op, 25 no. 5 in E Minor

This study demands variety of tone color and touch for each variation of the main theme. There is a formal ternary scheme, A-B-A, with the middle section contrasting with the principal sections. This is the traditional Romantic structure found in a character piece genre. According to its ternary scheme with expressive qualities and the exploitation of tone colour, this study much resembles the characteristic etude.

The primary motif is formed by a dotted figure with an appoggiatura in the lower part leading to a single note. This appoggiatura, which functions as grace-note, produces a dissonant sonority on each downbeat. For the opening section, Chopin uses this motif in three variations. Cortot then introduces different notions for these three variants to create proper tone colour and touch when following Chopin's original thoughts (see Fig. 4-5).

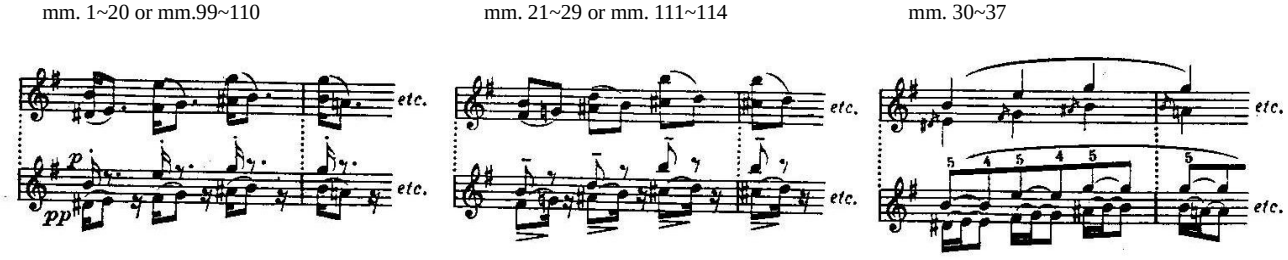


Figure 4-5 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 5*, ed. Cortot

For each second note of the interval in the lower right-hand part, the thumb should continually act as a pivot point to shift towards the next group.[118] First of all, the thumb requires a certain strength and mobility in its role as a pivot. You must be able to stand on the thumb, as mentioned before, regarding the structure of

118. Chopin, *Op. 25, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 31.

the hand and lower arm, the thumb is lined up with the radius, one of the two bones in the forearm. The thumb cannot be firmly held up without support from the radius, and cannot gain strength without the weight of the thumb itself, according to the natural pull of gravity while pressing down into the key. How easily the thumb can be well-directed depends on how well the pianist is aware of the support from the radius and the weight of the finger.

It is also important to remember that the base joint on the thumb is attached up to the same juncture as the wrist. Sensing these three joints helps the hand shift smoothly in quick motion. From here, we can move on to a discussion of the details of articulation. When considering the degree of weight to be put on the fifth finger in the three different articulations, which Cortot shows us in Fig. 4-5, it is possible to change colour and touch to any degree, depending on the directions you received from *sensory awareness*. For instance, the pianist should sense more weight on the fifth finger for the third variation of Fig. 4-5 and hold the finger with more firmness to execute the legato eighth note rather than the previous two variations. Sense the way you act and adjust the action to what it should be by your *sensory awareness*.

The middle section of this piece is written in the parallel key of E major, with a singing melody in a lower register accompanied by a broken-chord arpeggio figuration played by the right hand and the lowest bass part. For the lower singing melody, if the pianist can use the full weight of the hand and each finger more completely the melody will be projected out more easily with a warm and expressive sonority. In order to obtain the flowing of right-hand figurations up and down the keyboard, all four main joints in the arm

should be free, including the one always missed, the sternoclavicular joint between the sternum and collarbone (mentioned in *Op. 10 no 1*). If a pianist thinks the arm begins from the shoulder joint, instead of sternoclavicular joint, s/he consequently will lock the whole arm by restricting the flexibility of the shoulders. Therefore, each of these four joints needs to be unlocked and made fluid when articulating larger gestures over the keyboard.

Op, 25 no. 6 in G-sharp Minor

This is a study with various figurations for thirds played almost entirely by the right hand, and well supported with a left hand accompaniment. The only place where the left hand joins in with the thirds exercise is from bar 31 to bar 34 (four measures in the middle of the piece) before the opening theme returns. In this etude, Chopin employs different kinds of techniques in thirds, including trills in chromatic thirds, turns, scale combinations up and down the length of the keyboard, and alternating figures. The difficulties to be resolved here are those of maintaining smooth and even finger actions in quick tempo with softness and a light touch.

When beginning to work on this etude, it is important to find comfortable fingerings in order to get smooth turns and runs. The fingerings will slightly differ from one another according to the individual structure of the pianist's hand. In order to achieve greater stability in performance, it is important to try each experimental set of fingerings in different tempi, dynamics and articulations. The next step is to choose the most comfortable fingers and use them without unreasonable change. Cortot offers some excellent fingering

combinations designed for each individual section. At first, with the most comfortable fingerings, she should practice the upper part and lower part separately. This will help the player to obtain better *legato* playing and clean articulation before putting those two parts together. The lower part is mostly played by the first and second finger. Here is a preparatory exercise by Cortot to improve the mobility of these two fingers.

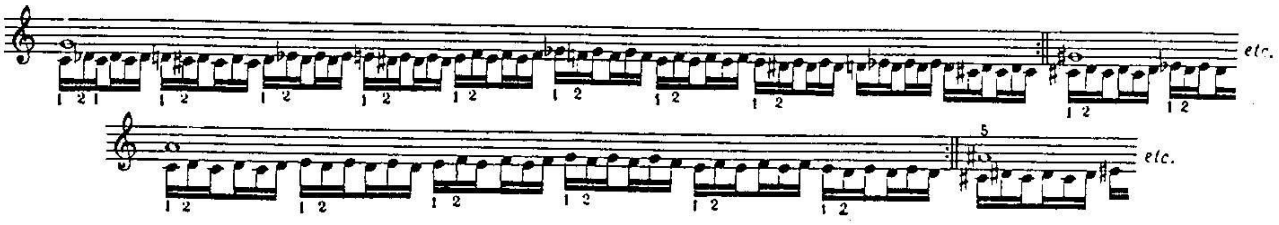


Figure 4-6 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 6*, ed. Cortot

Another difficulty to overcome is how to articulate the succession of thirds with a light and gentle touch. It requires the simplest and most natural functioning of the hands to guide the finger work spontaneously. As Chopin once described the character of thirds in this piece: "only through gentleness, by caressing the keys, can one master it."[119] According to his words, the shape of the hand and fingers, when touching the keyboard, should be simple and natural without unnecessary tension in any joint. The elbow and the arm can float slightly higher than usual. As the whole arm rises higher, the area of the fingertip which touches the keyboard will be made smaller, allowing the pianist to *caress the keys*. In that way, pianists could possibly create the tone color which Chopin needs for running thirds. If feeling tense in any part of the body, it is essential for pianists to revert to Primary Control, working step by step on the relationships between head,

119. Taylor, *The Pianist's Talent*, 93.

neck and back to localized/active parts. A holistically well-coordinated self makes this piece flow with a natural expression.

Another thing that should be taken care of is the rest between each phrase. Use the pause to refresh the hand and fingers. Take a nice breath and sense the "breathing" of the hands while travelling to the starting position of next phrase. You can use the rest to breathe, to refresh, to sense, to direct…etc.—anything you need for preparation. When you can nicely enjoy the moment of the rest, your music can breathe naturally by itself easily as well.

Op, 25 no. 7 in C-sharp Minor

This etude stands apart from many of the other virtuoso etudes of the *Op. 10* and *Op. 25* sets. This is a mournfully lyrical piece with a *cantabile* melody moving mostly in a lower register. This deep and melancholy melody played by the left hand sounds like a cello solo as it responds to a countermelody in the upper right hand part. The recitative opening and ornamentation seem to offer some implications of Italian opera. Completing the texture are the accompaniment figurations set in the lower right-hand part. It is very clearly in three layers.

As for technical issues, this study seems not quite as difficult as some. Even so, Cortot provided some suggestions for working with tone colour and touch for the different layers. He notes: "the poetical conception and the real technical interest afforded by this Study rest on a proper distribution of the tone-value of the two parts, and on the exact quality of touch required for binding—though not blending—the notes

together while retaining to each its expressive individuality".[120] Further, he presents the general scheme for proper dynamic arrangement and tone qualities:[121]

Upper melodic line: *mp penetrating*
Accompaniment: *pp but well-sustained*
Lower melodic line: *mf eloquent*

This study could be practiced according to this scheme as interpreted by Cortot. However, it is a bit risky if the pianist simply follows the rules and does not realize why it should be so. In being an artist, it is essential to understand the reasons why something is chosen. Pianists should train their ears to hear what their choices sound like and hear the essence of the music (tone colour and touch) as articulated through their technical means. This is why Cortot imparted not only the dynamic arrangement for each voice, but also the styles that should be considered. From the key, adjustments can be made easily by changing the degree of action necessary to craft the dynamic desired. However, tone qualities cannot be created without feeling the music's nature from inside the heart. Through learning and performing a piece by heart, greater freedom and the natural beauty of the music will come through.[122]

When expressing the impassioned melody in this piece, the pianist may display some exaggerated gestures that demonstrate their music-making abilities. It can be a healthy and spontaneous reaction to the music. Unfortunately, it can be harmful and unnatural when using the gesture to compensate for technical

120. Chopin, *Op. 25, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 48.

121. Ibid., 49.

122. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 198-99.

deficiencies. Take the opening solo, *quasi recitative,* for example, there is a *decrescendo* from the dotted quarter note (A-natural) towards the end of the bar to conclude this introduction with gentle softness. Some pianists have tendencies to contract the torso, hollow the back and lower down the head close to the keyboard in order to carefully craft the *decrescendo*. Those extraneous gestures tense up the whole body and won't help the fingers to create the proper tone colour and touch. When the pianists begin to misuse their body, music-making begins to be distorted. In the other hand, when using the self well, the necessary movement will enhance technique and refine the flow of the music. Again, some gestures can be a healthy and spontaneous reaction to the music which helps express the impassioned lyricism *if* the whole self is well-coordinated.

Op, 25 no. 8 in D-flat Major

This is an exercise for sixths. Parallel sixths run in melodically conceived shapes up and down the keyboard with the right hand. The accompaniment has complex figurations of different interval combinations according to the harmonic arrangements. The texture is series of double notes for both hands at the same time, except for the single bass note on the downbeat and the full chord progression in the last two measures. Chopin marked *Vivace* in tempo, *legato* in character, and *mezza voce*, as a dynamic guide. It should be played with a light touch and easy finger work to achieve what Chopin desired.

The style of *legato* playing required in the thirds etude, *Op. 25, no 6*, is slightly different from the sixths. The succession of parallel thirds is easier to connect with a smaller degree of hand rotation. For larger sixth

intervals, the hand requires some stretching with limited fingering combinations, such as 1-4, 1-5, 2-5, or 1-3. It is also harder to make a smooth turn in sixths than in thirds. If trying to exaggerate the rotating motion in order to connect the notes when dealing with the sixths progression, the pianist needs to slow down the tempo to accomplish each necessary hand rotation without hurting the arm. Rightly, a certain degree of rotation is necessary to free the wrist and arm in sixths, but the movement of each finger is tiny. Each finger is not only used as a pivot, it is also used to slide from one key to another. Once up to a quick tempo, the pianist may detach, just a little, the lower part of each double-note because of the help from pedaling to attain legato.

Another challenge for pianists is to make the playing smooth and *legato* playing at performance tempo while still maintaining well-coordinated use of the body. In all, musicians cannot hold a fixed position while performing any music, even though they might believe that the fixed position which they learned as a youth is correct. The great pianist, Heinrich Neuhaus, wrote in his book, "I maintain that the best position of the hand on the keyboard is one which can be altered with the maximum of ease and speed."[123] In other words, pianists should adjust the hand position according to what techniques are required and what the music demands. When adjusting the hand position as needed, it also prevents the fingers from becoming stiff and rigid in a fixed position.

123. Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, 101.

Furthermore, the way to make the hand and fingers function with more ease and freedom depends directly on how comfortable the fingerings are. In Cortot's study edition, he provides some different fingering combinations for particular measures. He suggests the pianist can select the most suitable fingerings according to their physical convenience. When experimenting with fingerings, it is essential to be aware of how the fingers work with the most comfortable functioning in every conceivable movement.

Op, 25 no. 9 in G-flat Major

This is a graceful and spirited etude nicknamed "Butterfly". The delicate flying of a butterfly and the regular fluttering of its wings are suggested by the characteristic sound of this piece. The motif is created out of a four-note group in the right hand. The figuration is to alternate *legato* and *staccato* playing in single- and double-note combinations, and two consecutive octaves. The left-hand accompaniment features an incessant jumping back and forth between bass notes and chords. Articulation patterns in both hands are consistent throughout this study. The difficulty is in maintaining a graceful *leggiero* touch with the *Allegro vivace* tempo.

Before getting into the complex movements, the pianist should know how to analyse the figurations into a series of simple gestures. It involves the same process as the Alexander procedure, moving from many small steps to eventually accomplish the whole figure. Each simple step carries its own purpose to achieve a single action, and the action should be consciously directed from the brain instead of unconsciously directed by old habits. Take bar 1 for example (see Fig. 4-7), the main melody is pointed out in Fig. 4-7b. Chopin used

the double notes and the octaves to enrich the sonority (Fig. 4-7a). This original four-note group (Fig. 4-7a) can be simplified into three-octave figure (Fig. 4-7c) according to the basic melodic line. Thus, octave practicing in this piece is the first step to getting used to the hand motions and melodic contour. To this articulation pattern (alternately *legato* and *staccato* playing in octaves), the pianist must use each downbeat as a pivot to lead to the next two *staccato* motions. There is only one big hand gesture needed to complete one figuration (see Fig. 4-7c). In other words, the first octave acts as preparation for the bouncing of the wrist-staccato.

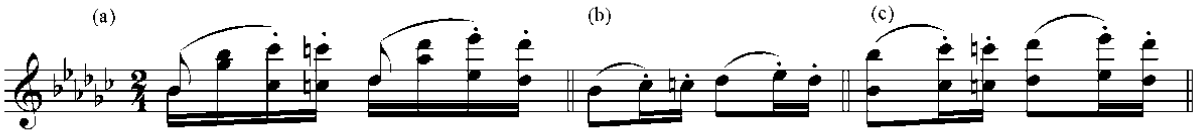


Figure 4-7 Excerpt of Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 9*, bar 1

For *staccato* practicing, Cortot also suggested some variants (see Fig. 4-8) to improve the flexibility of the wrist.

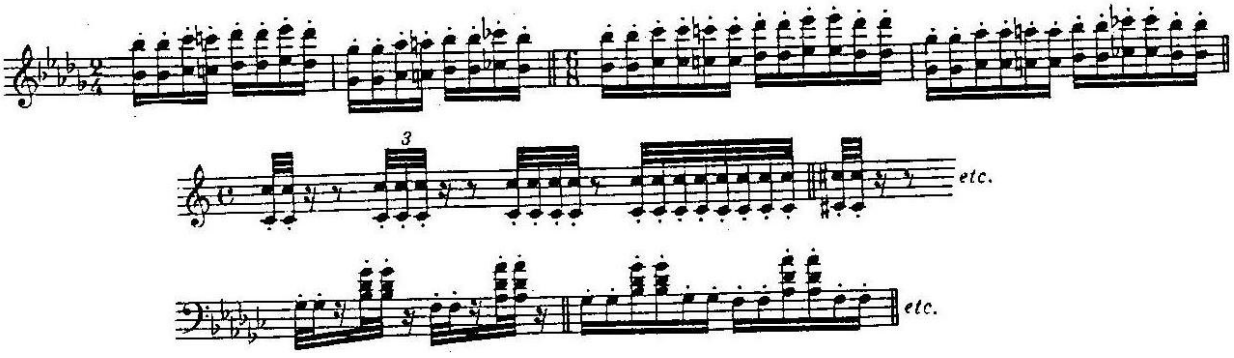


Figure 4-8 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 9*, ed. Cortot

For the first variant in perpetual motion, the pianist should keep his/her hand motion close to the keyboard as much as possible when moving to the next octave, bouncing each note lightly without tension in any muscle group. This kind of vibration, almost imperceptible in the hand, combines with a series of quick rebounds of the wrist that help the performer obtain even playing without effort.[124]

Op, 25 no. 10 in B Minor

After the light bouncing octaves of the Butterfly Etude, comes a complete study in octaves requiring a lot of strength and endurance. Chopin employed the three-part form with a contrasting midsection modulating into the parallel major key, B major. The outer sections feature chromatic octave figurations in parallel motion for both hands. Related thematic material appears transformed in the middle section treated with lyricism and in a slow tempo. Except for the *cantabile* beauty of the B major section, and the first few measures in a soft dynamic, the entire parallel octave figurations in the outer sections should be played with powerful *forte* to *fortissimo* sonority. Here, it is difficult to keep the energy going when playing the rapid chromatic octaves for a length of time without tiring the muscles. Unfortunately, if working under such fatigue, unnecessary tension in localized parts of the body will trigger their misuse. There are ways to overcome the technical difficulties here, if the pianist knows how to use the self in a well-coordinated manner to execute the different kinds of wrist-movement.

124. Chopin, *Op. 25, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 60.

It is obvious that smooth octave playing requires flexibility of the wrist with comfortable fingerings. In Cortot's opinion, wrist-movement can be divided into three types within *legato* playing of octaves: suspension movements, backward-and-forward movements and lateral shifting movements.[125] Listed below are the exercises associated with these three different categories (see Figs. 4-9, 4-10, 4-11).

Suspension movements (Fig. 4-9) are characterized by alternately raising the wrist with the entire arm downward when pressing into the keys of octave, and upward when leading to the next one. It involves not only the motion of the wrist but also the flexibility of the forearm and elbow. Again, the elbow is bent and pointing slightly out, i.e., pronated, away from the torso with the wrist positioned slightly in towards the body for a natural posture at the keyboard.

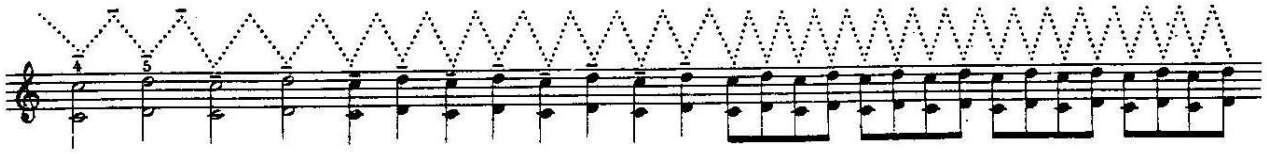


Fig. 4-9: the dotted line suggests the legato you should image

Backward-and-forward movements (Fig. 4-10) refer to moving back and forth between a black key and a white key (in and out of the keyboard). With this motion, the wrist and the fingers for top notes are the pivot points used to shift to subsequent placements, except for the two successive 1-4 fingerings (on D-sharp to E; B-flat to B; F-sharp to F; D-flat to C) with sliding motion in fingers. The upper arm and shoulder joint should

125. Chopin, *Op. 25, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 63.

be free using these movements to achieve the chromatic octave scale in quick motion without tightening the forearm and hand.

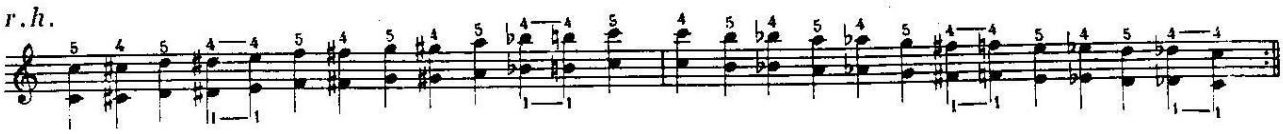


Figure 4-10 Excerpt from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 10*, ed. Cortot

The third type of wrist movement is the lateral shifting movement (Fig. 4-11). When running an octave scale (C major) up and down the keyboard, the wrist should move in parallel motion according to the contour of the scale. Such movement is accompanied by stretching the arm to complete the traveling motion up and down.

Figure 4-11 Excerpt from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 10*, ed. Cortot

After understanding the different types of wrist movements and the natural mechanisms of whole arm motion, the next step is to learn how to secure the power to play *forte* or even louder. First, it is important to stop forcing the volume, which creates extra tension. Some pianists have a tendency to lift the shoulders, pull the torso down, and smash the keys with contracted arms, wrists, hands, and fingers in order to play louder.[126] Besides those old habits, some pianists even try to shake their torsos with successive octave hand motions in

126. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 135.

order to keep the energy. In this kind of shaking, those pianists may feel relaxed in the upper body, but they lose the support from the back and the sitting bone, and tense up the lower body. The unnecessary tension, which results in misuse of the body, must be eliminated with the termination of such habitual actions. This, again, is the way of Inhibition. Only then will the pianist pass from one way that is known (the habitual way) to one that is unknown and unfamiliar (a new well-coordinated way). It is also essential to include the back when performing with power. Walter Niemann, referring to Busoni's playing, noted it is "quite incomprehensible, this modern way of playing octave, light as a feather, all the strain taken by the back muscles."[127] Powerful playing is thus achieved with free arms and a strong back. For this study, securing the power to play *forte* or even louder comes from the sensory awareness of the stability from the back as it is naturally constructed.

Op, 25 no. 11 in A Minor

This is an intense and dramatic etude with a certain degree of strength and dexterity required for each finger. Except for the opening introduction and a few measures of *piano*, the general dynamic markings range from *forte* to *fortissimo* in both hands. Similar to the primary section of *Op. 25 no. 10*, it requires strong support from the back to maintain such great volume for some duration. In this piece, it is more difficult to keep each finger independently strong for the runs covering the entire range of the keyboard.

127. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 138.

In this etude, there are two different figures that take place simultaneously. The right-hand idea consists of alternating chromatic runs in sex-tuplets. The left hand has a march-like theme in dotted rhythm, similar to the right-hand figurations of the *Revolutionary Etude, Op. 10 no 12*. It is not that difficult to sustain a powerful sonority in the lower register with double notes or full chords if the weight of the whole arm is applied and a strong back is supporting. The real technical difficulties lie with the rapid and ceaseless runs of the right hand. "The finger will acquire a maximum of independence of action and intensity of tone to give the impression of the uproar and crash of the storm, and at other times, the mysterious ominous sound of water roaring in the dark." This is the proper coloring for the right-hand figurations, as described by Cortot.[128] He also recommends the following exercise to obtain equal strength for each finger with *legato* playing.

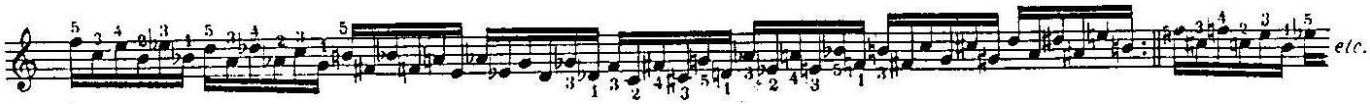


Figure 4-12 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 11*, ed. Cortot

For practicing this exercise, the rotation of the hand, wrist and arm should be employed in order to transfer the power from the back into each finger freely. You can control the volume for each note, depending on the degree of the motion you rotate the hand. The bigger the motion you rotate, the louder the sound you can create. It requires a higher degree of flexibility in the wrist to support the fingers with firmness. When

128. Chopin, *Op. 25, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 73.

rotating the forearm, it is necessary to be aware of the motion of the radius and ulna, the two parallel bones in the forearm that cross their positions when the palm is facing down. Restricting the motions within the individual finger work when doing the Fig. 4-12 exercises will not yield the power and strength due to the rigidity in the wrist and arm.

Besides the great support from the back, another element during the performance often missed is *breathing*. When the pianist becomes excited during a performance, s/he tends to forget to breathe naturally. Good breath support is required to stabilize coordinated use of the psycho-physical mechanism. "It is not necessary ….to think of taking a breath; as a matter of fact, it is more or less harmful to do so,"[129] asserted Alexander. People have a tendency to raise the upper chest and shoulders when taking a deep breath and hollow the back when exhaling. In this way of breathing, you tense and shorten the neck and lose the support of Primary Control. To prevent this from happening, it is most important to stop thinking of doing it. The pianist just needs to sense and be aware of his/her breathing, allowing it to happen by its own, even when facing a hard and difficult piece or phrasing. It is essential to keep breathing and remain naturally free in the whole self when performing such an intense and dramatic piece.

Op, 25 no. 12 in C Minor

This is the last of Chopin's twenty four etudes in the *Op. 10* and *Op. 25* sets. It is an etude requiring great strength and profound emotion with highly technical demands. The tumultuous arpeggio figurations

129. Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, 334.

sweeping up and down the keyboard could signify a violent storm. The rapid and powerful runs in parallel motion achieve a sense of unity and intensity. The frequently accented notes either on- or off-beat are punctuated within the majestic melodic line. This is a study for developing the mobility in both hands, and for maintaining the physical endurance.

The pianist must bring out the powerful melodic contour, shifting the thumb and fifth finger almost seamlessly on the same note when moving the hands along the keyboard.[130] For this, Cortot recommends some variants and exercises to practice the thumb to pinky shifting on arpeggio positions (see Fig. 4-13).

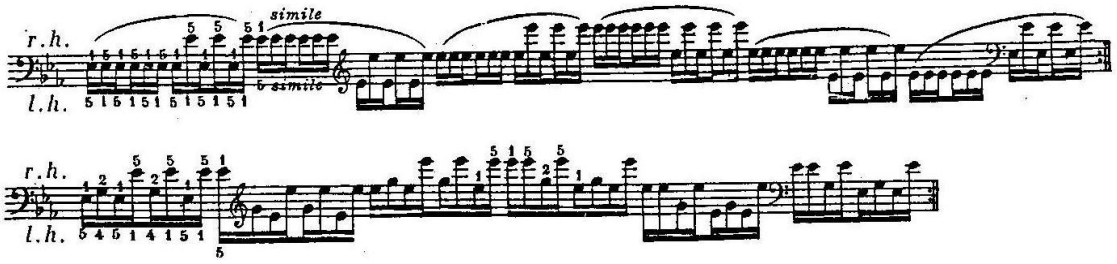


Figure 4-13 Excerpts from Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 12*, ed. Cortot

It is crucial here to prepare for the shifting motion from either the thumb to the fifth finger or vice versa. Take bar 1 (right-hand arpeggio figurations), for example, in this etude (see Fig. 4-14).

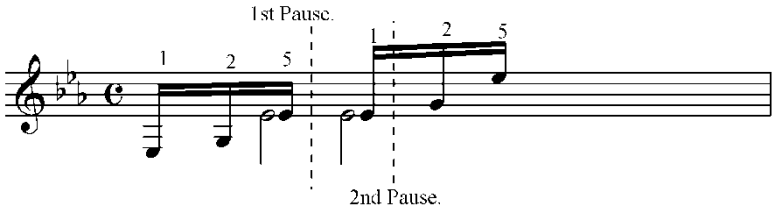


Figure 4-14 Excerpt of Chopin, *12 Studies, Op. 25 no 12*, bar 1

130. Chopin, *Op. 25, for Piano*, ed. Cortot, 84.

When reaching to the little finger on the first E-flat note, the pianist must be ready to shift the thumb on the repeating note to the next arpeggio position. After pressing down on the first E-flat by the fifth finger, there needs to be a brief pause (FIRST pause) that allows the remaining four fingers drawing up towards the pinky side in order to be ready for the shifting motion (from the pinky to the thumb on the same note). Then, shift the pinky to the thumb on the repeating note in quick motion without effort. Again, this is merely a shifting motion on two fingers (an indirect way to achieve the movement), not to focus on "the finger exercise on repeating notes" (a direct way for *end-gaining*). After pressing down the second E-flat played by thumb comes the SECOND pause. This pause allows the player to re-direct the new thought (stretching the rest of the four fingers away from the thumb side) in order to set up yet another arpeggio position. The repeating note (E-flat) connecting the two arpeggio positions is the most important transition. The two pauses, before and after shifting on the same note, point to the timing required to Inhibit the desire to act prematurely. Instead, the pianist is consciously well-directed from the brain to prepare for the next posture and action.

For both parallel motions sweeping over the keyboard, it is necessary to move the body with careful awareness of Primary Control in the sitting posture as it relates to a series of rising and falling figurations. To create a state of total coordination between head, neck, and back, pianists should be aware of the sitting bones and the natural lengthening of the spine. The weight of the upper body is centered over the hip joints and sitting bones following the axis of the spine.[131] From here, the pianist must sense the gravity of their

131. Conable, *What Every Musician Needs to Know about the Body*, 20.

upper body supported by the sitting bones and spine. When sitting at the piano, pianists have a tendency to move the torso sideways, or backward and forward from the point of the waist, instead of moving at the sitting bones. Based on the mechanisms of the human body, the torso is aligned from the sitting bones upward, not from the waist. When working on arpeggio runs over the length of the keyboard, let the fingers lead, let the body follow with good coordination, and the torso moves sideways at the sitting bones. Once this happens spontaneously, the pianist will perform something with great ease. Think of yourself a vehicle for the music. It moves through you and “plays” you.

CONCLUSION

When learning piano etudes, pianists set out to conquer particularly challenging technical issues through tedious finger work. In Cortot's study edition of Chopin's Etudes, he offers "a rational method of study founded on a searching analysis of technical difficulties."[132] He designed a great number of preparatory exercises, constructed from the most difficult passages, to lead pianists to overcome their technical problems and refine their performance. He also suggested some ideas about the posture of the hands when working on difficult passages. These valuable annotations and exercises really deserve to be carefully studied.

However, technique does not depend solely on playing mechanisms. It is a manifestation of the use of the self as applied to music-making. F. M. Alexander, founder of the Alexander Technique, believed there is a natural rhythm and composure within the human body. His Technique helps the pianist acquire disciplined use of the whole self according to the laws of Nature. A well-coordinated posture with a clear thought-process thus works as a unit of body and mind.[133]

An accomplished pianist, with fine technique and innate musicality, understands how to apply the playing mechanism in great harmony with the whole self. It is essential to make full use of all the possibilities that body and mind can provide to complete an artistic piano performance.[134]

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132. Chopin, foreword to *12 Studies*, ed. Cortot.

133. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 174-75.

134. Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, 83.

In compiling this research paper, I have found that Cortot's preparatory exercises in his study edition of Chopin's Etudes can more effectively be executed by learning the Alexander Technique. Here, there are six principles that should be understood and applied to the technical exercises: Use of the Self, Primary Control, Awareness, Inhibition, Direction and Action. Pianists sitting at the piano must maintain a regimented degree of coordination between head, neck and back, i.e., Primary Control. Even when articulating necessary gestures during the performance, it is important to never lose the support of Primary Control. As the great pianist Heinrich Neuhaus said: "the best position is that which can be altered with the maximum of ease and speed."[135] The great care of the relationship between head, neck and back should take precedence over all other localized actions, such as finger work, hand motions, and wrist rotations, when practicing the exercises.

Piano technique does not only impart the ability to play fast and accurately. Work on the technique is work on music-making.[136] The point is to know how to analyse the figurations practiced and realize the essence of the music. However, technique does not solely depend on physical motions. It also employs *psycho-physical* means to execute an artistic performance. The self works as a whole, indivisibly with body, mind, and spirit interwoven. Every part of a gesture then comes with a thought-process. Pianist should adjust the posture with conscious mind according to what a particular technique needs. The key here is to not let learned technical habits control the body and misuse the self. Free technique should come from good use of the self with well-directed mind—once the mind is clear, then sensory awareness improves. How the pianist

135. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 123.

136. Neuhaus, 79.

releases unnecessary tension depends on how much s/he is aware of the functioning of body. For instance, the wrist can be rotated smoothly to achieve quick arpeggio figurations but the shoulders still stiffen because of faulty sensory awareness. The only way to acquire free technique is to sense habitual experiences and control them through Inhibition—stop an action, before it is wrong. In this research, I took Cortot's exercises in his study of edition of Chopin's Etudes as examples, suggesting how to inhibit habitual misuses of the body and redirect actions and thoughts in healthier ways. From the Alexander-directed perspective, pianists have a choice to change the way they work on any kind of technical problems and create entirely new experiences. "To co-ordinate yourself, [is] to learn and change and grow, *to pass from the known to the unknown*."[137] Knowing this will make the study of technique more enjoyable and profitable. The goal is to free the body and the mind, and just "let it be." Work on the use of self is work on the technique. Work on the use of self is also work on music-making. Free technique comes from good use of self. Once the freedom of technique and the self are achieved, the beauty of the music arrives on its own.

137. Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 276.

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VITA

Li-Fang Wu was born in Yunlin, Taiwan in 1979. She received her first piano lesson at the age of five. She attended the Special Music Program in Sacred Hearts High School at the age of twelve for six years. While in Special Music Program, she was major in piano, percussion and composition. At the age of seventeen, she gave a recital debut and began performing publicly as a soloist and chamber musician. She continued her musical studies in Taipei Municipal Teachers College under Professor Ta-Sheng Chang, the internationally acclaimed pianist and conductor.

After graduating from Taipei Municipal Teachers College, she came to the U.S. In August 2003, she entered Texas A&M University-Commerce and earned her Master of Music in piano performance in December 2005. Li-Fang is currently a doctoral candidate in piano performance at Louisiana State University where she is studying with Professor Gregory Sioles and plans to graduate in December 2010. While in America, she holds several prizes from national competitions, such as Louisiana State University Concerto Competition, Northeast Texas Piano Competition and others.

Ms. Wu continued her activities as pianist and chamber musician in international music festivals throughout Asian, Taiwan and U.S. In her hometown, Taiwan, she owns the Piano Studio, where she teaches piano and music theory.